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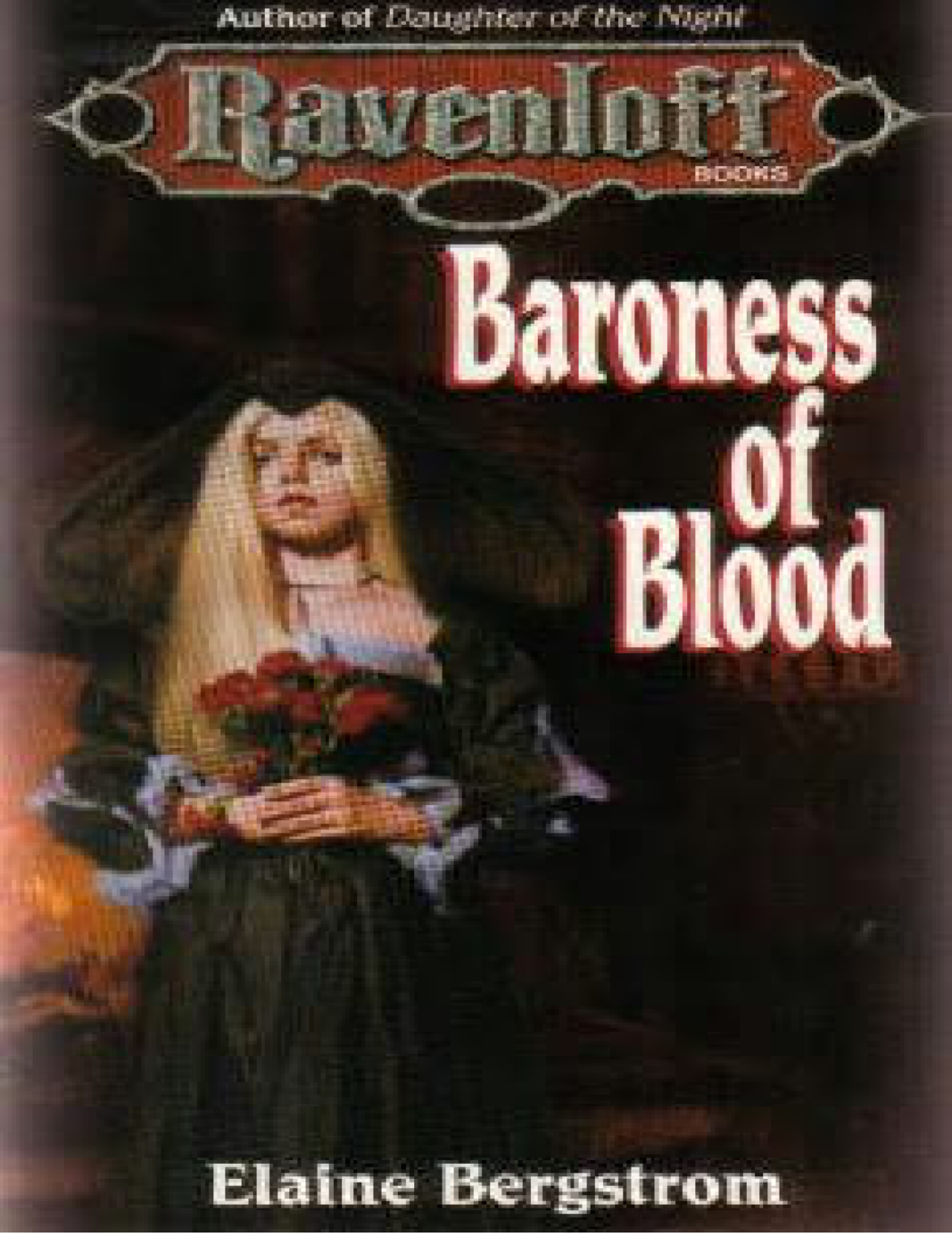
Baroness of Blood



Elaine Bergstrom

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

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Elaine Bergstrom

Baroness of Blood

PROLOGUE

The Seer, Sagesse, had lived for nearly a century in the great cave in Tygelt Mountain. She had long since forgotten how she had come to be there, who her parents might have been, or where she had been raised. Tygelt Cave, with its tall pillars of amethyst crystal and milky white limestone, was her only past, her dreamlike present, and most importantly the all too real glimpses she had of the future.

She'd long ago understood that her gift was responsible for her lack of memory, as well as the fact that one day seemed so much like the last. She did no work except to care for herself. The merchants of Tygelt, the miners who dug for gold in the depths of her mountain, and all the others of Kislova, from the rich to the abjectly poor, kept her in food and clothing-in exchange for a glimpse of their futures.

She made no demands, because she needed little. Of late, her clothing had been tattered, her food more scant, but she understood. She had looked in the milky waters of the cave pools and seen the battles raging across the land, and the terrible future of her people. Her warnings were so dire that nearly all stopped seeking her advice.

It made no difference any longer. In her last vision, she had seen her own death.

PART I

THE LEGACY OF BARON JANOSH

ONE

"Ilsabet, wake up!"

Ilsabet pulled the down-filled covers tighter around her thin body and ignored her maidservant's call.

"You were up half the night writing in that journal, weren't you?"

Greta, Ilsabet's maid, could sign her name in a beautiful script, but that was all. Reading, writing, even contemplative thought seemed beyond her reach. But she was a practical and caring woman, and Ilsabet ignored the shortcomings. "No," she replied. "I just couldn't sleep."

Instead, Ilsabet had gone to Lord Jorani's chambers in the highest room in the castle tower. Nimbus Castle had been built on a narrow peninsula that stretched nearly to the center of the slow-moving Arvid River. The river's source was a hot spring in the mountains, the water always warm. Except for the hottest summer months, a fog usually hung around the castle, making it seem as if the thick stone walls rose from the mists themselves. The night fog was denser than usual, leaving Ilsabet alone above a world of faded colors and muted sounds.

It seemed that if she concentrated she could see the signal fires of her father's camp, could even hear the cries of the soldiers as they rode into battle, the screams of the rebels cut down by the soldiers' arrows, swords, and lances, or captured and beheaded on the battlefield, dying as rebellious subjects should die.

In the few hours she'd slept that night, she had dreamt of her father, Baron Janosk Obour, and how their life had been when there was peace in the land. Then he had ruled over the loose confederation of nobles with the same benevolence as his father and grandfather before him. All that changed in the course of a single year.

Her mother finally died of the same wasting sickness that seemed to affect Ilsabet herself. In the midst of the baron's mourning, the far northwestern provinces of Deneri and Kapem pulled out of the confederation. This was their right, but they also laid claim to the gold-rich region of Tygelt. If Nimbus Castle and the nearby town of Pirie were the heart of Kislova, Tygelt was its purse. With no choice, the nobles of southern Kislova declared war.

So the long, bloody feud had begun, ending finally three years later with the executions of a dozen defeated nobles, the annexation of their provinces, the marriage of state between Baron Janosk and Lady Lorena of Deneri, and the near bankruptcy of all Kislova.

Taxes rose. The gold of Tygelt was used to fill the nobles' coffers. The Kislovan peasants, who had been promised assistance after the war, protested the hardships and were imprisoned and executed by

the petty nobles. The peasants then appealed to Baron Janosk, but his course was already set. The delegation that came to Nimbus Castle was imprisoned as insurance against rebellion. The rest went home and, ignoring the plight of their comrades, rose in open rebellion. In a desperate move, Janosk had the prisoners burned in the Pirie town square. In the two years since, Baron Janosk's reputation had become bloody, implacable. Now with one more battle the civil war would be over.

Her father told her that he would never be defeated, not so long as his family believed him to be invincible. She'd not given in to doubt even once through the night. At dawn, the commotion in the castle quieted somewhat, and she had returned to her room and slept.

No, let Greta scold, she would stay in bed this morning.

Much of the wood needed to heat the castle in the damp winter months had been taken for the smelters. No new logs could be cut until the rebels were driven from their strongholds, Ilsabet's breath frosted in the chilly air. She stifled the cough that would alert Greta that she was awake, and buried her face in her blankets.

Her peace was short-lived. A quarter hour later, Greta returned, standing by her bed, shaking her as if she were Greta's own child, not the daughter of the lord of her land. Ilsabet accepted the familiarity from the woman who had raised her. "Ilsabet, your father sent word that he is coming home to eat with his family," Greta said. "If you wish to miss seeing him then just go on…"

Greta never finished. Ilsabet had not seen her father in over a week. His presence was a gift she would not miss. She threw back the covers and reached for the robe Greta held out to her.

"I stole a basin of hot water from the kitchen when the cook wasn't looking," Greta said. "While you wash your face, breathe in the steam. It will help to clear your lungs."

"Did you hear how the battle went?" Ilsabet asked.

"No, your father will undoubtedly tell you though, then you can tell me." Greta studied the gowns arranged on hooks along one of the chamber walls. "The red one? It will give color to your face."

Ilsabet looked in the tiny mirror above the washstand.

"You're right about my pallor," she said as she stepped into the gown. "I wouldn't want father to worry about my health when there are more important problems to consider."

"But someone should worry," Greta insisted. "I am going to ask the Lady Lorena to move your chambers to a warmer room until you're better, perhaps the one above the kitchen."

"I will not use it! That was Mother's room."

"Given to her for a good reason, child. It is the warmest."

"I'm not that sick!" Ilsabet insisted, though fear of a death as pain-

filled as her mother's was hardly the reason she would not sleep in those chambers.

The room in which her mother died was believed to be haunted by her ghost, and Ilsabet feared spectres. Greta said that in the ages since Nimbus Castle was built many had died within its walls, and many spirits stayed. Ilsabet had a certain sensitivity to them, glimpsing the almost-shapes that formed in the incessant river fog, in the smoke that rose from the hearths, or waiting in the shadows at the ends of the hall. It was said that the most powerful of these were the ones who had died through treachery or in great pain. If so, her mother's ghost would be powerful indeed for she had held tenaciously to life, battling death for every breath. Ilsabet hid her terror well; otherwise Greta wouldn't have suggested the move.

Greta recognized the uselessness of arguing. "As you wish, child," she said. "But tonight I will bring wood for your hearth if I have to destroy the dining hall chairs to obtain it."

"Take care not to get caught if you do," Ilsabet responded. "With so much unrest you might be taken for an enemy."

Greta's round face grew pale. Ilsabet noticed it and hugged the woman. "I was only joking, you old fool," she said, troubled by the sudden thrill she'd felt at seeing the woman's fear. "Now go. With half the household servants conscripted, I'm sure you have other duties. I can certainly dress myself."

"The steam," Greta ordered. Ilsabet sighed and lowered her head nearly to the water's surface, breathing deeply until the congestion in her lungs lessened. Then she stood in front of the mirror to arrange her hair.

Lady Lorena was fond of saying that Janosk's three children had each been given some special gift. Marishka, the eldest at nineteen, had inherited her mother's incredible beauty. Mihael, two years younger, had his father's rugged good looks and skill with weaponry, though it seemed that he would always be too thin to wield the heavier swords. And Ilsabet, almost sixteen, was the bookish one. Lorena listed her virtue with some regret, noting sadly that Ilsabet's intelligence had not made her a wit.

Ilsabet knew Lorena was right. She always had to weigh her words carefully before speaking, if she spoke at all. Ilsabet knew all too well that most nobles perceived her as plain and shy-perhaps even dim-witted.

But Ilsabet was certain of her worth. Her father reminded her of it often enough when he quizzed her about her lessons or stopped in when she was being tutored by Lord Jorani. Jorani praised her, too; he believed she would one day serve her brother as Jorani served her father-as advisor, family historian, and trusted friend.

Not a bad future, she thought. Better at least than an arranged, loveless marriage, such as her sister faced.

She plaited her thin blond hair in a single long braid and tied it with a red silk ribbon, then rushed down the winding stone stairs that led to the great tunnel and dining hall.

The tunnel dissected the lower floor of the castle and served as a link between the front gates and courtyard and the river. In times of need, soldiers could load supplies from land into barges to carry them downstream. When the tunnel was not in use, the doors were closed and the space used as part of the castle. The doors were of heavy oak, and their carvings depicted the history of the Obour family from the first baron to her grandfather, who had ordered them made.

She stopped at the top of the wide stone steps leading to the courtyard and looked across it to the iron gates.

The sharp spikes at the top were intended to keep enemies from scaling them. Now they served a more terrible purpose. Every spike held the head of an enemy-from the rebel leaders who had fought against the Obour family to the sympathizers from the villages to the few spies who had managed to infiltrate the castle itself. Ilsabet was fascinated by the number of women and children's heads mounted there. She felt an odd pride, almost a kinship in seeing them, in knowing that even children younger than herself could be so dangerous as to merit death.

"Ilsabet?"

She turned. Her father stood in the doorway. Though he'd stripped off his battle armor and bathed, she could see the brown bloodstains on his riding cape and the weary slouch of his head and shoulders. "Father!" she cried, then rushed to him, hugging him tightly, inhaling the scents of sweat, and smoke, and death.

"Still happy to see me, after all I've done?"

"You did what you had to," she responded. She took his hand and led him into the dining hall.

In honor of her father's presence, a small fire was burning in its huge stone hearth. The long table clos-est to it had been covered with a cloth. A plate of warm bread and fresh-churned butter had already been brought out, and a servant was just carrying in a bowl of sliced fruit. There would be meat and eggs as well. They might have a shortage of firewood, but there was no lack of food from the fertile farms to the south and east.

Five hundred years ago the Obour family had been no wealthier than the other farmers in the land of Kislova. With hard work and a little luck, the family gradually became its rulers. The structure that had become the Obour castle had been started three centuries before by Baron Mihael. Each subsequent ruler had altered and added to the

original design-one an extra tower, another the huge outer curtain walls-leaving the dining hall the only part of the original structure.

A painting above the hearth portrayed the first Baron Mihael on his battle horse, sword in hand, ready to defend his lands and title. Since his time, the family had never been defeated. It was unthinkable that a handful of peasants could pose a threat now.

By custom, the duty of leading the baron to the table belonged to Lady Lorena, but the woman was undoubtedly upstairs making the final touches to her coiffure and dress, Ilsabet sat beside him, chatting happily, pleased to be given some time alone with him. When the others arrived, she yielded her seat to Lorena and moved to the farthest place at the table, as was fitting for the younger daughter.

While they ate, her father refused to discuss the battle, listening instead as Lorena detailed the petty problems of the household, the laziness of one of her maids. Afterward they drank herb tea while Baron Janosk told of the battles he'd fought. As Ilsabet had expected, his troops had won.

"We dismembered a hundred rebel officers last night," he said. "We'll behead a thousand soldiers today. We've ended the war simply by eliminating the supply of fighters."

"But the men have sons, Janosk," Lady Lorena said softly. "Perhaps if you showed them some mercy they would come to love you as we do."

"Silence!" he bellowed. "Do you think I like being seen as a barbarian? There is no other way, I tell you. But I have been wise, that's why Mihael here has not been fighting at my side."

"I'm old enough," Mihael insisted. "I should have training in what I'll need to know."

"On an invading enemy, not your own people," Janosk insisted. "I'll be the one to destroy the last of the rebels and take on the burden of my people's hate. You'll keep your hands clean of this, and when I die and you inherit my title, the people will see you as their savior, Baron Mihael the Good."

Mihael winced. "But an Obour nonetheless," he insisted.

"People will forget the past like the fools they are," Janosk said, his patience obviously wearing thin. Mihael's face reddened and he looked down at his plate.

As the meal continued, Baron Janosk quizzed each of his children on what they had done in his absence. Marishka had begun a new tapestry, one far more intricate than anything she had tried previously. It showed Janosk mounted on his war-horse and carrying a shield with the family's symbol-dragon's teeth above an unsheathed, bloodied sword. Mihael had begun studying battle strategy with old General Noire, a man who had trained Janosk himself when he'd been

a child.

"And your studies, Ilsabet?" Janosk asked, leaning forward so he could look at her sitting, ignored, at the end of the table.

"Jorani said that before he can teach me anything more, he wishes to speak to you," Ilsabet replied sorrowfully.

"Did you ask him what that meant?" her father asked.

"No, but I doubt it is a good omen," she said.

"We'll ask him together as soon as the meal is finished, all right?"

Lady Lorena rested a hand on her husband's arm. "Don't you have to return to your troops?" she asked.

"Mot until this evening," he replied. "There's plenty of time for everything, beloved."

The endearment was spoken with sarcasm. Lorena's expression grew remote, and the meal ended in near silence. After, Janosk and Ilsabet climbed the curving stairs of the great stone tower to the uppermost room where Lord Jorani lived and worked.

Scrolls and ancient tomes covered the walls and the huge wood table in the center of his workroom. Today, he was seated at it, quill in hand, recording details of the struggle being told to him by General Raimundi, a huge warrior with a weathered face and thin beard, who had accompanied Baron Janosk home from the battlefield.

A pair of hawks, tethered to perches near the windows, screeched a warning of their approach. Jorani turned, saw his master, stood, and made a deep, respectful bow.

Ilsabet knew that he would not have bothered with the gesture had the general not been there. Jorani was, after all, her father's closest friend.

"Leave us," Jorani said to the general. When they were alone, he gave Janosk his own chair, motioned Ilsabet into the other one, and sat on the edge of his table.

Jorani most resembled the birds he kept. Tall and cadaverously thin, he had deep-set, piercing black eyes, prominent high cheekbones, and a hook nose above a firm, expressive mouth. He once confessed to

Ilsabet that in his youth he had hoped to be a harper. Ilsabet had often heard him play and marveled at his skill, once asking if he regretted his choice.

"I would have perished from boredom, and undoubtedly starved," he'd told her and smiled. There had been no mirth in his expression, no warmth, and she understood. He was always kind to her, almost gentle, but something about his appearance terrified. No one would ask such a man to play at anything but a funeral.

"Ilsabet says that you wish to speak to me," Janosk said. "Has she become a lax student?"

"Lax? Not at all. If anything, she is too intelligent. There is little I can teach her of philosophy and the world. But given her intelligence, she may have talent to equal mine in other things."

Her father seemed to know exactly what Jorani meant. "Have you discussed this with her?" he asked, speaking of Ilsabet as if she were not present.

"I wished to speak with you first, and ask permission to begin her education. If you give it, I would like to start by bringing her to the battle site tomorrow to watch the executions."

"You think it necessary?"

"It is. And, yes, she is ready."

To reveal any bit of her excitement might make Ilsabet seem too young, too eager. So she listened carefully, her expression guarded.

"Do you want to come to the camp and see the carnage?" her father asked.

She nodded solemnly.

"Do you know the services Lord Jorani performs for me?"

She nodded again.

Baron Janosk stood, bent over Ilsabet, and kissed her forehead. Jorani followed him to the door, but when the scribe bowed, the baron waved him back impatiently. "As boys we wrestled one another," he said. "No need to be formal when there is no one here to notice."

He left, the hawks screeching at the sound of his boots on the stairs.

As soon as they were alone, Jorani turned to Ilsa-bet. "You said you know what I do for your father. Tell me what that is?"

She pointed to the center of the rug. "Beneath the carpet is a door that leads to a hidden room. You were in that room for days before father left for battle. I think you made him some elixir to drink that would make him stronger."

"And I gave him a powder as well, and instructions to have one of his soldiers go upwind of the rebel camp and let the powder loose into the air. It filled the rebels with fear and indecision. I made them easy to defeat."

Her eyes widened. "You did that?"

"Does that trouble you?"

"No, we only won with fewer losses on both sides. We would have won anyway."

"A good reply. Now, how did you know about my private chamber?"

"I spied on you. I saw you go down there."

"How did you keep the hawks quiet?"

"I walked carefully. I made no sound, and stayed in the shadows

of the passage. I've had much practice." She smiled, ruthlessly she hoped. "I've seen Marishka sitting with that handsome fop from the palace guard. I've seen Mihael steal off to play cards with the kitchen servants. And I have seen you with Lady Lorena, holding her while she cries."

"We all fear for your father's safety, child," Jorani answered.

"She curses him with her lack of faith."

"You know what her custom demands if he dies in battle. Can you blame her for being afraid?"

"She'd do better to breed. Then custom would allow her to raise her child."

Jorani's anger flared, then dissipated just as quickly, leaving him gazing thoughtfully at her with just a hint of distaste. UI think I was right about your education, but there will be no lessons today. Prepare for a long hard ride tomorrow."

TWO

Ilsabet met Jorani in the courtyard the following morning. She was dressed as befit the daughter of the lord, in a pale blue riding gown trimmed with lapis beads. Her hair was braided around her head like a crown.

Jorani, in contrast, dressed like a servant and carried a pair of hooded brown robes. "Put this on," he ordered, holding one out to her.

She shook her head. "The daughter of Baron Janosk Obour, ruler of Kislova, will not sneak through her father's lands like some thief."

"Your father has no guards to spare for our ride," he reminded her, thrusting the robe into her hand. "Put this on."

She hesitated, then said, "Very well, but it comes off before we reach my father's camp."

They rode in silence through the fields, fallow in late autumn, Jorani constantly scanning the countryside, alert for an ambush. At the edge of the forest road, he reined in his horse and gave three loud whistles. A handful of soldiers rode toward them. As they did, Ilsabet untied the brown robe, turning the front flaps back over her shoulders to reveal the beauty and wealth of her gown. In spite of her plain appearance, she looked regal, and Jorani, noticing this, gave a quick nod of agreement. With Ilsabet at his side, they led the soldiers through the forest to the baron's encampment.

The smell of death was thick as they approached the camp. Ilsabet looked upwind and saw bodies stacked in a single huge pile, their pale limbs tangled together like some weathered deadfall. Farther on, they passed a second site where bodies were arranged carefully on the ground, respectfully covered and guarded until they could be returned to their families for burial.

"The difference between victors and defeated extends even to death," Jorani commented.

Ilsabet covered her face with her hand, inhaling the scent of the perfume she had applied that morning, and quickened her pace.

Baron Janosk's soldiers lounged in front of their cooking fires. Many of them were wounded, and the rest looked far too weary to fight. On the ride in, Ilsabet had been told that their rest was well earned. The clash had ended in a complete rout of the enemy. Their leader and three of his henchmen had been captured as they fled toward the border, undoubtedly trying to reach the protection of Baron Peto's lands. Ilsabet passed three of the prisoners chained to a post. They looked dirty and starving, as if they had been in hiding a long time.

The rebel general had been separated from his men and put in an

iron cage near the center of the camp. Though his hands and feet were shackled and a dirty rag was tied around his mouth, he was heavily guarded. Ilsabet dismounted and walked toward his cage, Jorani at her side. "Note him well," Jorani whispered to her. "This is what an enemy looks like."

The rebel leader was a young man, not nearly as tall or muscular as her father, hardly formidable except for the fanatical expression on his face and the fierce fire that seemed to glow in the depths of his hazel eyes.

"He calls himself Dark," Jorani said. "Mo one knows who his family might be, though from the looks of him I'd say he comes from the lands north of Pine."

"What will happen to him?" Ilsabet asked.

"What do you suggest?" Jorani asked in turn.

"Lady Lorena would undoubtedly think we should wed him to Marishka."

"Undoubtedly, but to do that we'd need his real name, which he refuses to give, probably because he has a wife already," Jorani replied.

"Father will want to behead him."

"What would you do?"

She had the young man's interest now. He stared at her, an insolent expression on his face, as if to say that nothing done to him could ever deter others from his cause. Looking directly at him, she answered boldly, "I would take the men who served him and burn them at the stake. Let the sight of their agony be the last thing he sees before we take out his eyes. Let the pain of that same fire be the last thing his hands feel before they are scarred so terribly that he will never be able to lift a sword against us again. Then send him back to his people, an example of the justice and the mercy of Baron Janosk Obour."

The guards eyed her with respect.

Baron Janosk had come out of his tent to welcome his daughter just in time to hear her speech, and to see the reaction of the guards to it. He walked up behind her, laying a hand on her shoulder. "At nightfall it will be done as my child commands," he said, then led Ilsabet to the shade and comfort of his tent.

The space resembled his room in the castle, though on a far smaller scale. A thick carpet covered and softened the earth beneath it. The canopy bed was draped with netting to protect against the biting flies that plagued the country in winter as well as summer. The table could easily seat half a dozen people. Servants were clearing the campaign maps from it and replacing them with plates and silver goblets for the noonday meal.

As they dined, Jorani and her father discussed further measures to deal with the rebellion. Normally Ilsabet would have listened, but not today. Instead, she stared out the open tent flaps. Soldiers were obeying her father's command, piling wood in the clearing near the cage. The rebel leader watched, and even though she was far away, Ilsabet knew his stance was one of defiance.

How would the man feel when he saw his comrades die? How would he feel when they laid him back and lowered the hot pokers toward his face? Such terrible thoughts, and yet there was a strange and exciting beauty to them as well. If she wasn't certain that her father would object, she would ask permission to go to the man, to talk to him, to try to understand the current of fear that must be running through him now.

She started to look away, but glimpsed a girl, a few years younger than herself, hiding behind a nearby tent and watching the men work. It seemed to Ilsabet that the girl was crying. Could Dark be her father? The girl was too small to be a threat. Ilsabet turned her attention back to the men.

The patch of sunlight falling through the open tent flaps moved slowly across the carpet and up the far wall. At dusk, Janosk and the others went out to witness the executions. Ilsabet felt dizzy but held her head up bravely as she sat between her father and Jorani.

They waited until the fire was burning high before throwing the rebel leaders in. One died almost immediately by turning his face to the flames and inhaling their searing heat. The others struggled, but it was hopeless, and they died soon after. It seemed to Ilsabet that, after so many patriots had been killed defending her family, after all the widows and fatherless children had been left alone and weeping for those destroyed, it should have taken them much longer to die.

Their leader was next. He did not struggle when they opened his cage, and he walked bravely with his guards to the flames. It was seemingly the first time he'd noticed her, sitting so still between the two adults. He stared at her, not the fire or the bodies of his comrades or the heated swords being raised to his eyes.

With his head still turned toward her father, Dark began to speak. "I tell you that a dozen more will take my place, and a dozen more for each of them," he said as the fire touched his hands. "There will be no peace in this land until the heads of your children are mounted on pikes above your castle gates, until the walls of the castle itself are dismantled stone by stone, until…"

He fought the pain, valiantly it seemed to Ilsabet, then for all his pride, he began to scream.

This was just punishment for the rebels' crimes. Ilsabet listened to his screams, a vague smile of satisfaction on her face, and a current of

excitement rolling through her frail body.

Beside her, Baron Janosk stood, his hand in a white-knuckled grip on his sword. "Never," he mumbled. "You will never harm them so long as I am alive."

"He speaks the empty words of the defeated, and rather poorly at that," Jorani commented.

"But the man still has power, that's for certain," Janosk said then called to his men. "Take out his tongue as well, and be done with it."

They pulled Dark away from the fire. There was no need to force the knife past his teeth for he was panting from the pain, and on the edge of shock as well. Ilsabet doubted he even felt that last crippling cut. If he did he gave no indication.

After, with what was left of his eyes and hands wrapped in lengths of dirty cloth, Dark was taken out of camp, and left on the road to Pirie.

Ilsabet watched him walking slowly down the road, his head bowed, his feet scuffing along the ground feeling the way. At the rate he could travel, it would take him days to reach the town.

"If I had said 'let him go' would you have done it?" Ilsabet asked her father.

"You are my child. You never would have suggested that," he replied.

"What will happen to him?" Ilsabet asked.

"He may die before he reaches his family," Jorani said. "So much the better."

"He'll get help soon enough. That kind always finds it," Baron Janosk replied.

Her father's voice sounded uneasy, and Jorani looked at him with some concern as they walked back to the baron's tent. The tent was warmer now, heated by glowing stones carried inside from the campfire and collected in a pit near the table. A corner of the huge tent had been screened off and a bed made up for Ilsabet. She changed out of her gown and slipped on a warmer robe and boots and joined her father and Jorani at the table.

The light from the trio of oil lamps on it threw shadows on the tent walls, multiples of father, Jorani and herself, all flickering nervously.

For a few minutes no one spoke. Jorani opened a bottle of wine and poured three glasses. He held up his glass, cleared his throat, and addressed Baron Janosk. "Your daughter is right, my friend. It is over. I salute your skill." He drank. Ilsabet did the same, sipping the little bit he had poured her.

"And what do you advise I do next?" the baron asked.

"Go home to Nimbus Castle tomorrow and fly green banners from

the walls as a sign of peace and reconciliation. Do what you can to restore prosperity to your lands so your people will know that you are a ruler who cares for them as well as one who punishes."

"I've fought them too long. No, the iron hand must remain, or my mercy will bring the family to ruin." Ilsabet had been thinking of her own small family and how Lady Lorena had joined it. "Father, you took Lorena as your second wife to forge a bond with an enemy. Couldn't you do something similar now by wedding some of our soldiers to the widows of the men they killed?"

"The child makes an intelligent suggestion," Jorani said. "There will be a shortage of men in the villages. You'll have to send some of the soldiers for harvest anyway, or we'll all starve next winter."

"If it's done properly… diplomatically… and when I have done something to warrant their affection once more." Baron Janosk's voice trailed off as he considered the possibilities. "Yes, I believe Ilsabet shows signs of your type of wisdom, Jorani," he said, looking at his daughter as he spoke.

"What do you suggest we do next?" Jorani asked.

"We let the troops rest a bit, then while they're jubilant in their victory, we march on Sundell."

Jorani considered this, then admitted, "We'd annex the richest lands between here and the Shaar. The course has its merits." Ilsabet could not understand the nuances of the adults' discussion. The strength of the drink, combined with the long day, soon made her sleepy, and she retired to her bed behind the screen painted with drag-ons and knights in armor, listening to Jorani and her father speak of the future in low, hopeful tones. She saw someone's arm brush against the wall of the tent. There were spies everywhere, her father often said. She was about to call out when she heard a soldier outside greet another. Whoever was there left, padding softly away. Ilsabet rolled over and tried to sleep.

THREE

The physical pain in Dark's eyes and hands was bearable only because he had no choice but to bear it. The consequences of what had been done to him gave far greater agony.

Blind, mute, scarred; unable to fight or work or even to take care of himself, he would serve as a reminder to all who once knew him that it was futile to challenge Baron Janosk Obour. Worse, he would live out his days as an object of pity to his wife and boys, as well as his village.

If he ever reached it. Since he had left the Obour camp, he had been hearing the cries of the forest cats. At first their screeches had been distant. Now they seemed to be growing closer. The cats were large, but cowardly. They would not attack a grown man in daylight. Had he been whole, he would have simply traveled on until nightfall, then made for the rocky ground and found a cave or fissure in which to sleep. Knowing any attempt to leave the road would undoubtedly result in his being lost, he sat with his back to a tree and waited, thinking that whatever pain the cats inflicted with their teeth and claws would be nothing compared to what he'd already been through.

And they would spare him a useless future.

As he waited for the end to come, he sensed another sound, the faint footsteps of someone steal-ing closer, trying to get a look at him without being seen. Soldiers would not bother with such stealth. It had to be one of his own spies moving toward Baron Janosk's camp.

Hope, that refuge of the vanquished, rose in him once more, and he gave a low cry, the first cry he made without means to speak. It sounded scarcely human.

"Dark?" someone whispered.

The voice was so soft, so low he could not tell if the person was young or old, male or female. He turned in the direction of the voice. Cried out again, louder.

Another whisper. "Is it safe?"

Dark nodded and heard the sound of someone shuffling closer in the darkness, kneeling beside him, and whispering, "Dark! Dark, what has Baron Janosk done…?" There must have been a moon lighting his face because the voice trailed off and the arms holding him began to shake. Did he really look so terrible?

"Dark, I'm so sorry. I saw you captured and stole into the camp to learn where you were held, but I had no time to warn the others. I saw the soldiers crowd around the pyre. I heard you scream and thought they'd burned you as well." Apparently realizing he could not recognize a voice from the low whisper, his rescuer said, "I'm Chardin.

Renze's daughter."

Though it had been some time since he'd seen her, he remembered her well enough. She'd been a tiny girl with bright brown eyes and a tongue just shy of impertinence, a child no older than Baron Janosk's bloodthirsty brat. Now she was fighting alongside her father, and Renze, always protective, let her. How desperate they'd all become.

"I stayed in camp and listened to the baron plotting," she went on. "They plan to invade Sundell."

Dark bowed his head. Baron Janosk would use the wealth of Sundell to buy his people's loyalty. The move made sense. Dark had been captured while trying to cross the border in hopes of convincing Baron Peto of Sundell to assist them. It most likely would have been a futile gesture, for Peto's neutrality was well established.

His neutrality was far less likely now.

"I have water… I stole a little of the soldiers' food…" Chardin paused after each statement, waiting for a response. "We have a small camp in a hill cave a few miles from here. Father is there with some of the others. Can you walk?" she finally asked.

He nodded again and let Chardin help him to his feet. The terrain they traveled was far from level. Though Chardin was attentive, Dark stumbled often, falling once and instinctively catching himself with his burned hands. He managed to stifle a cry, but it was some time before he could find the strength to go on.

By the time they neared the remote camp, Dark's legs were barely able to hold him. Chardin called to the others to come help. Dark felt the heat of someone's torch, arms lifting him, carrying him to the fire. There they made him a bed from a soft pile of pine boughs and hides, and wrapped him in a blanket.

They had no healer, but one of the rebels had some ointment that he rubbed on Dark's burned hands and eyes, and a potion that he made Dark swallow. It alleviated the pain somewhat, and gave him strength.

Through pantomime, nods, and shakes of the head, the camp learned the fate of the other men.

"We'll never recover from these losses," Renze said despondently. "The rebellion is over."

Dark shook his head, motioning Chardin to tell what she'd learned.

"Are you certain?" Renze asked.

Both Dark and Chardin nodded. "I heard the baron himself speak of it," Chardin added.

"I'll cross the border and warn them," Renze said.

Dark shook his head, pointed to himself, then leaned forward,

hands extended and groping the air, implying that if caught he might be dismissed as having simply lost his way in the forest.

"I understand," Renze said. "But you'll never make it alone."

Dark pointed toward Renze, then held his hand closer to the ground. "Chardin?" Renze asked after a moment.

Dark nodded. He felt the girl move close to him, and take his arm again.

"He's right, *Papa*," she said. "If we're stopped, I can say I'm his daughter.

Dark shook his head, pointed to his ears, then pushed his hand away.

"All right," Chardin said. "If you hear the soldiers coming, I'll run and hide."

"I see why you want her," Renze commented. "She understands you, and like all our children, she knows how to be invisible when necessary. We'll escort you as far as we dare, then leave you two to go on alone. But I'm not going to rely entirely on you. I'll try to make the mountain crossing to the south and send another party through Freeman's Pass. First rest a day longer. Go tomorrow night."

Dark agreed. At night, his blindness would be less a handicap.

A day later, Dark sat with his comrades for the evening meal. They sounded more hopeful than they had the previous night, and Dark knew his decision had been the right one. By leaving, he told them that no matter how defeated they were, they could still resist the Obour family. By leaving, he gave them hope.

Two of Renze's band took Chardin and Dark as close to the border as they dared to go, then left them. Soon after, Dark heard horses galloping down the road; soldiers, no doubt, since commoners had no mounts and nobles would not be abroad during the uprising. Chardin pulled him into a stand of tall grasses and as they had agreed, hid some distance away from him. The soldiers went past, Chardin later reported to Dark, without even glancing in their direction. UA hopeful sign," she said.

Dark only shrugged. The real danger would come soon, when they entered the border zone, where the baron's patrols watched for those trying to flee Kislova.

Because of Dark's wounds, they'd chosen a dangerous spot for crossing-a high alpine meadow of tall grasses and low stands of rock that sloped gently down to the border. Their buff-colored cloaks would blend with the land. Falling flat before a patrol spotted them, they might pass for rocks or bare spots in the grass, or so they hoped. They also hoped that, by picking such an open spot for crossing, they might encounter fewer patrols.

As Dark traveled, he considered Baron Janosk's last words to him.

"Tell your men that they fought well, but the fighting is over. Tell them to go home to their families and their fields, or they'll starve this winter. Tell them that my soldiers will be in Pirie and Tygelt and throughout the lands around the villages to help them." The baron had chuckled and added, "Tell them as best you can. An ingenious man such as you will find a way."

An ingenious man had found a way, Dark agreed with grim satisfaction. He would defeat the baron and his family, and bring them down together.

Their journey went more smoothly than Dark had expected until the very end. Chardin had just whispered that she saw the border stakes, and they'd quickened their pace, very nearly running over a Kislovan soldier who'd fallen asleep at his post.

As he lunged at Dark, Chardin took him from behind, sinking her knife deep into his back. He cried out a warning as he died.

One of the mounted Sundell patrols had been riding through the high grasslands of the mountains when they saw a number of Kislova foot soldiers cross the border. Speeding up, they reached the soldiers just as they caught up with their quarry.

Shaul, commanding his first border patrol, cursed his bad luck. Though the patrols had turned back countless refugees since the rebellion in Kislova had begun, this was the first violation of the border by Janosk's troops, and it placed him in an awkward position.

"Let them have their prisoners," one of his comrades suggested. "Pretend it was all a mistake. Besides, I don't relish having to guard men such as those."

Shaul was inclined to agree. Though the handful of invaders wore the blue-and-gold tunics of Kislova, they looked less like disciplined fighters than street thugs. They'd formed a circle around their prisoners. As Shaul rode closer, he saw what looked like an old man and a boy of twelve or thirteen…

No, not a boy. No boy had features that fine, or hands that delicate. Nonetheless, the girl gripped a long dagger as though she knew how to use it, slashing at the soldiers who came too close. Shaul quickened his pace. Some of the Kislovan soldiers turned toward him, though the others were still intent on their prey.

"Leave us in peace!" the girl cried. "Haven't you done enough to him?"

Shaul took a closer look at the old man, saw the bandages on his eyes and hands, the way his mouth moved, trying to speak. Possibly the man had been mutilated as punishment for some crime-more likely for taking part in the rebellion. But if the man's crimes were so

terrible, he should have been killed outright, not made to suffer like this.

"Back off!" Shaul ordered. "You are in violation of Sundell lands. Whoever is in charge, come forward!"

A man with long greasy strands of hair and a dark stubble on his face looked up at him. "You're mistaken," he said insolently, as if the Sundell riders weren't better armed and didn't outnumber his own troops two to one.

"There are the markers." Shaul pointed at the red-and-yellow stakes farther up the hill. "Let those people go." He pulled out his sword to emphasize his resolve.

"These prisoners escaped," the Kislova soldier said. "We would honor your laws in such a matter."

Shaul looked at the blind man, exhausted, defiant; at the girl, panting with fear. Whatever thoughts he'd had of compromise ended at the sight of their helplessness. "Leave them and go," he ordered.

The Kislovan commander shrugged and grinned. 'As you command," he said. As he motioned his men away, his hand fell to a dagger beneath his cloak. Before the Sundell soldiers could react, he let it fly toward the helpless man.

The girl struck out with her arm, deflecting the knife. She received only a small wound, but the cut was enough. She fell to her knees, clawing at her throat, trying to force breath into lungs that no longer worked.

Shaul struck, the force of his blow beheading the Kislovan commander. His men joined him in the fight, but though two were cut, only the commander's blade had been poisoned. The battle ended in minutes, with six of the Kislovan band dead. The seventh and last, only a little older than the dying girl, threw down his sword and surrendered.

By then the girl had lost consciousness and lay across her companion's knees. As Shaul watched helplessly, her body stiffened, then relaxed into death.

"Lord Jorani's poison," the Kislovan soldier whispered.

Shaul looked from the girl's face with its blue lips and open, reddened eyes to the man holding her. His body shook with grief, though he was incapable of tears.

"Were you in the rebellion?" Shaul asked.

The man nodded. He pulled back a corner of the girl's cloak and motioned for Shaul to reach into a pocket. Shaul did, drawing from it a small scrap of parchment. On it was scrawled a single word-Invade.

"Janosk?" Shaul asked.

The man nodded again.

Shaul reached down and grabbed the man's arm. "Ride with me,"

he said, pulling the man up behind him.

"One of you bring the soldier to the castle," Shaul ordered. "And one other the body of the girl, as well. Perhaps our healers can determine the nature of the poison that killed her."

"What about the other bodies?" someone asked.

"Leave them for the cats," Shaul said. "Hold on to me," he whispered to the man sitting behind him, then made off at a gallop for Shadow Castle in the center of the great forest of Sundell.

FOUR

Four days after Ilsabet had visited her father's camp, Baron Janosk summoned the family to an early breakfast. Marishka, never an early riser, wore a robe over her nightdress, and had her long auburn hair tied back with a scarf. Lady Lorena looked pale in her simple blue gown, but her eyes were, thankfully, clear, her expression stoic. As always she was perfectly groomed.

Ilsabet had also dressed with care. "I see that someone else gives your father the respect that is his due," Lorena said, not even glancing at Marishka, though her remark was certainly directed at the girl.

Marishka stifled a yawn. "Where is father?" she asked. "It would seem to me that if he wanted to dine at this odd hour he would…" Her voice trailed off as Baron Janosk entered the room. He was dressed for battle in a thick leather doublet. Mihael, who walked a few steps behind him, was similarly clothed.

"I present my new second in command," Janosk said, moving aside so the boy could walk in front of him to the table.

Lorena frowned. "Do we learn of your plans now, my lord, or must we wait until after the battle is over?"

"First we eat," he replied.

Lorena rang the servants' bell, and the food was carried in-trays of fruit and fresh bread, quail eggs poached in wine and glazed with butter, and a plate of trout pulled fresh from the river that morning.

Only the men seemed able to eat-her father voraciously, Mihael out of necessity. Ilsabet picked at the fish and nibbled a bit of bread and jam, waiting expectantly to hear the news.

After the table was cleared, Janosk ordered the servants to leave. Then, in low tones, he made his announcement. "Today we ride west to annex Sundell," he said.

"Sundell!" Lady Lorena exclaimed. "Janosk, this is madness."

"I will give the jewel of Sundell to my loyal subjects," Janosk said. "I do it as much for Mihael as for myself."

Lorena continued to object. "But Sundell has so much wealth, and the troops…"

"Silence!" he bellowed. "The decision is made. We attack tonight."

Lorena normally respected her husband's temper. Not now. "Tonight! Have you gone to the mountains and consulted Sagesse?" she asked.

"The Seer?" Janosk sneered. "Allied with rebels from the beginning. Why would I trust her advice?"

Ilsabet said nothing then. Jorani had undoubtedly prepared the troops well. Later however, Ilsabet went looking for Jorani. She found

him downstairs with the troops, overseeing the loading of burlap bags.

Drawing him aside, she asked, "Does Lady Lorena have reason to be concerned?"

"In battle, there are always reasons, but now more than ever," he replied. "The troops are tired, many are wounded and cannot go with us. We should have a full force for this expedition. Your father, however, sees things differently. He thinks time would give the rebels a chance to regroup, and give Sundell a chance to learn of our plans."

"Is he right?" Ilsabet asked.

"I see the wisdom of his decision. A surprise attack should be successful." He pointed to the bags in the wagon and added, "I've done what I could. If things go as we hope, we'll win easily."

Soldiers were preparing their mounts. Servants filled the courtyard, bringing out fresh bread and dried meat.

"Someone so small could get trampled here," Jorani told her. "Go up to my chamber and pray for us."

An hour later, she stood in Jorani's tower room and watched the troops assemble and ride, their blue-and-gold banners waving in the morning breeze. She stood at the window, looking west until even the dust raised by the horses was no longer visible. Though news of the victory would not come for two days, she vowed to remain in the tower, watching and praying until her father returned.

But no potion of Jorani's could compensate for the trap Baron Peto's soldiers had laid. Even nature seemed to oppose the invasion. The wind had blown steadily from the west, making any use of Jorani's gasses and poison dust impossible. Of the thousand soldiers who had ridden west so confidently, less than two hundred returned. Many were wounded. All were exhausted, no match for the Sundell troops following closely on their heels.

Ilsabet reached the courtyard just as Jorani came riding in, her father strapped in front of him on Jorani's black stallion. "Close the gates," the baron whispered, and Jorani repeated the order loud enough for all to hear.

Mihael, who rode beside his father, protested, "There are stragglers behind us. Wait a bit."

"If they'd fought with greater valor, we'd be riding into Shadow Castle now," Baron Janosk mumbled.

The gates swung closed. The soldiers carrying out the order moved slowly, allowing another handful of men and the lesser lords and officers who had commanded them to retreat inside.

No sooner had they done so than they heard the huge war drums of their enemy, and saw their riders carrying the Sundell banners,

black with huge gold suns centered on them.

"A thousand… no, more!" one of the soldiers on the battlement called down.

His men carried Baron Janosk into the great hall. While Lorena and the castle servants tended him, Jorani and Mihael went to survey the condition of their defenses.

As soon as the men had left, Ilsabet moved to her father's side, staying close to him while the servants removed his battle armor, gripping his hand while the healer examined his wound.

Even to Ilsabet's untrained eye, it was a dangerous one. A lance had pierced his side just below his ribs. Though the bleeding had stopped, the wound appeared deep and dirty.

"If I try to clean it now, it will only start to bleed again," the healer said. "I can't risk that. You've lost too much blood already."

"And if you leave it?" Janosk asked.

"It will most likely infect. Lord Jorani may know something to combat an infection so deep. I don't."

Jorani had always been ready with potions for strength and protection, but Ilsabet had never seen him tend the wounded. If the healer could not help him, no one could. She adopted the proud stand she thought meant Obour. After years of hiding her emotions, she would not let her father see tears. She held her head high and fought back all signs of her despair.

Ilsabet kept that regal stance even when her brother and Jorani returned with the worst possible news. The civil war had drained the castle's resources so there was no way they could wait out a siege for more than a few weeks. Worse, should Sundell attack, the castle would fall within hours.

The baron shut his eyes a moment, trying to accept what had to be done. When he opened them, all signs of weakness had vanished, replaced with new resolve. "Bring a potion to give me strength," her father said to Jorani.

"To fight?" the healer asked. "I must advise you that it's too dangerous."

"I only want to look as if I could fight," the baron replied.

Ilsabet understood what he planned to do. She shook her head and said to him, "They haven't won yet."

"They've won the battle. I must see to it that our family survives the war."

While Jorani went for the potion, Janosk wrote an offer to surrender and sent it Baron Peto's camp, requesting an immediate reply.

Lady Lorena cried openly, burying her face in her hands. Marishka, who had kept her distance, moved close and hugged the

woman, sobbing with her.

Baron Janosk eyed their grief with distaste. "I release you from your pledge," he whispered to his concubine. "I spare your life."

She looked sadly at him. "Is that really why you believe I weep?" she asked.

"If there are other reasons, your devotion is somewhat belated," he replied. He might have said something to Marishka, but her grief had made her deaf to any advice he would have given. Ilsabet saw him looking at her sister, undoubtedly recalling through her his wife's beauty. He turned to his son. "Mihael, pledge allegiance to Peto and serve him well, then wait for the opportunity to regain what is ours."

Mihael nodded respectfully, yet Ilsabet could see that, though he longed to rule, he was already uncomfortable with the duplicity his father demanded. Poor Mihael, she thought, cursed with both ambition and conscience.

Her father had just turned his attention to her when Jorani returned carrying a carved wooden box. He knelt beside the baron and pulled a glass vial from inside. "I see that Peto and his men are at the bridge," he said. "You'd best drink this now."

The baron did, gagging from the cloying sweetness of it. He lay still a moment as the potion did its work, then took a deep cleansing breath and looked at Ilsabet standing beside Jorani, her expression as stoic as her teacher's, her father's. "Learn from Jorani," he said. "And never forget what is done here, until the day you can avenge my death. Now help me sit up."

Ilsabet did, and watched as the servants brought his formal dress-the white tunic and blue cape, both woven of Kislovan wool and trimmed in gold from Tygelt. Even the small exertion of washing and dressing caused the wound to begin bleeding again, and extra bandages were needed to cover it. With his cape arranged to hide any blood that might seep onto the tunic, Baron Janosk stood, and flanked by his family, went to greet the victor.

They stopped midway down the wide stone steps leading from the private rooms to the great tunnel, then waited as the lesser nobles of Kislova assembled behind their lord.

His subjects said that Baron Peto Casse of Sundell had been raised with all the indulgence that wealth and a doting mother could provide. He had his father's expressive brown eyes, unruly red hair, and muscular build; his mother's fine nose and golden complexion, and her volatility. Though easily frustrated, given to bouts of temper and impulsiveness, he would have made an admirable ruler in time.

But he'd had no time. His father died when Peto was only

seventeen. Reluctantly, he found himself in charge of a kingdom so well managed that his guidance was unnecessary.

Though his intentions were good, he was likewise impulsive, and early in his rule had often acted without thinking matters through. Intending to make his mark on his kingdom, he dismissed his father's advisors and chose his own from among equally inexperienced friends. A series of disasters, both military and civil, had brought hardship to his land. The carnage of the battlefield and, worse, the sight of small children starving in their mothers' arms, made him realize the importance of prudence. Now, after a decade of seasoning, he eagerly consulted his father's advisors on all important matters, carefully choosing what was best for all his people.

When the civil war broke in Kislova, he'd put the welfare of his people first and remained carefully neutral. To enforce that position, he'd tripled the number of border guards, augmenting the foot patrols with mounted ones. It had been a fortunate decision, for he was certain that without warning of the invasion by the blind Kislovan rebel, his kingdom would have fallen. In the days since the man had been brought to him for careful questioning, he'd had little time to contemplate the whimsy of fortune.

But as he rode through the thick walls of Nimbus Castle with his sword held upright before him, he pictured for a moment his own stronghold, and Baron Janosk riding through its gates as victor. That was how fate would have gone if his men had not been in precisely the right place at the right time to save the rebel's life, or if the blind man had been less brave, or if the girl had been unwilling to accompany Dark on his quest.

The contemplation in this moment of victory made him merciful, as did the sight of a far different Baron Janosk than he remembered.

That man had been strong, powerful. This man looked old, his skin a sickly hue, his arms shaky. In spite of this, he walked unaided down the stairs and stood defenseless, with head uncovered before his enemy.

"Since you are here I assume that you agree to my terms," Janosk said in a voice all could hear.

"I do."

"And you will hold me alone accountable for the invasion?"

"I do," Peto replied.

"And you will spare my family and allies? And accept my son's offer to be a vassal to you?"

"I agree."

"Then raise the sword you carry, and end this." With these final words, Janosk knelt for execution.

Peto dismounted. "I'll never understand what made you invade

my lands, but we were once allies and can be allies again. Will you pledge to serve me?" he asked, his voice conciliatory.

Janosk slowly shook his head, and in a gesture of trust, removed the cape and handed it to Jorani. As he did, Peto saw the raw pain in his eyes, glimpsed the fresh blood seeping onto his tunic, and understood. With a nod of acknowledgment for his foe's brave move, he raised his sword and slashed sideways through the man's neck.

As the head fell away, the woman behind Janosk fainted. His older daughter threw herself over her father's body and began to scream. The son bore his father's death well, but it was the youngest child that drew Peto's attention. The girl stood trembling at the sight of the blood, then raised her icy blue eyes, looking at him with such intense hate that he wondered if she were some sorcerer able to kill with a glance. Without a word, she turned and walked up the stairs, her step firm, her hands tight fists at her sides.

Peto turned to Shaul and the Kislovan rebel mounted behind him. "Is it the Obour custom to burn their dead?"

The girl who had been weeping raised her head and answered for them. "It is," she said.

"Then take him away and prepare the body as custom demands." He looked at the girl and asked, "Is there any waiting period required?"

"Mo," she said.

"Then let this be over at nightfall," he ordered.

Peto waited until the courtyard was empty save for his personal guards. He had already admired the beauty of the lands around the castle. Now he stood in the center of it, looking at the imposing outer walls and gate, the airy design of the living quarters rising before him with their delicate oval windows covered in clear crystal, their towers lifted majestically toward the sky.

Nimbus Castle-his spoil of war.

This should have been his moment of triumph, indeed would have been save for the sudden chill he felt. He might have rationalized and said it was caused by the clouds moving in front of the sun, or the evening mists already rising from the river and curling through the open doors, or by the weariness of battle, but in truth the chill was caused by none of these. Instead he had a feeling of doom so strong it seemed as if someone were speaking words of dread clearly into his mind:

No good will come from this victory-not for your family or for the Obours or for the citizens of Kislova who I am sworn to protect. Leave this place. If you are wise you will never return.

He spun and looked toward the path leading to the river. In the place where the mists were the thickest he saw the floating figure of

an old woman, her long white hair flowing like the folds of her gown. There, yet not there, but whether this was vision or spectre he did not know. "Leave this land," she whispered and raised one pale hand, pointing at him.

"I cannot," he replied. Nonetheless, he mounted his horse, and without a backward glance at the castle or the apparition, rode quickly toward his camp.

FIVE

Ilsabet retreated to the great hall and paced the length of it, hysterical with shame and sorrow. She'd seen the blind rebel leader ride up beside Baron Peto and knew exactly how Peto had been warned of the invasion. She wondered how she'd live with the guilt of her father's death, then alternately how she would survive now that he was gone.

Greta found her standing at the window, motionless and rigid as she watched servants stack wood for her father's pyre. Greta put her arm on her charge's shoulder, but Ilsabet did not lean against her, nor acknowledge her presence in any way.

"Servants know so much, Greta," Ilsabet finally said. "Have you heard who gave my father his lethal wound?"

"I understand he fought with Baron Peto, himself."

"Ah! So I can hate him. How marvelous." Ilsabet turned to Greta then, and the servant must have seen the sheer joy she felt in that hatred, a joy that brought with it a kind of madness.

"There is little you can do to him no matter how much you loathe him, child," she said.

"Never call me 'child' again," Ilsabet responded. "And I have no need of consoling. Why are you here?"

Greta looked at her uneasily. "The rite will be start-ing in an hour. Baron Peto has sent word that he wishes to meet with the family afterward. I thought you might wish to prepare."

"Prepare? Yes, I suppose so." She followed Greta to her chamber where she deliberately chose the same gown she had worn on the day she'd visited the camp. She wanted it to serve as a reminder of her rash words, and of her vow to never be so impulsive again.

"You should wear red or black, the colors of mourning," Greta chided.

"I've chosen the colors of our house," Ilsabet replied. "Father would want someone to do so."

"So he would," Greta agreed. She was putting the last pins in Ilsabet's hair when they heard the ringing of the huge iron bell in the courtyard, summoning the castle to the funeral rites.

"Go on ahead, Greta," Ilsabet ordered. "I'll come soon."

She waited until Greta had gone, then ran down the hall to her father's room, retrieving some of his treasures, which she carried to her own room and hid in a cupboard. Downstairs, she moved through the crowd to take her place beside her brother, just as the priests were beginning their chant.

Ilsabet was not the only one wearing the blue and gold of the

Obour family. Her father's valet wore his livery, as did a number of the serving maids. Lady Lorena was dressed in similar tones, and her richest gown, Ilsabet noted. Her hair was unbound, a sign of sorrow among her own people, and her face was a moving pattern of fear and grief. Mihael and Mar-ishka stood beside her, black-cloaked, heads bowed.

Baron Peto stood nearby. He'd also dressed simply, his expression as somber as the family's. "At least he shows respect for his enemy," one of the house servants whispered loud enough for his companions to hear.

Respect! Ilsabet thought. The fact that he is here at all shows his lack of respect for our grief. She looked at her father, his body covered by his war shield, his face so serene in death as to seem almost dull. However, the servants who had prepared the body had done well. There was no sign that her father had been beheaded, save for the wide strip of leather covering his neck. She glanced around but saw no sign of Dark or any of the rebels. Apparently, Peto had the good sense to order them to stay away.

Had her father died victorious, one of the priests would pause at the end of the ceremony to recount his deeds and valor in battle. Instead, the service ended with the prayer. Then with a sudden wailing, the priests threw torches on the oil-soaked pyre.

The torches sputtered, then the heated oil flared and spread, the flames so high and hot that the mourners had to step back. As they did, Ilsabet saw Lorena sway on her feet. Was she about to faint again? It would be like her, Ilsabet thought.

Baron Peto moved through the crowd, possibly meaning to catch her when she fell, but just as he grabbed her, she pulled herself out of his grasp, leaving him holding only the ripped hem of her sleeve. Then, with her wail merging with the priests', she flung herself forward onto the pyre. With a wall of flame between her and the crowd, she was beyond the reach of any rescuer.

Her skirts flared, giving a glimpse of the long legs that had served her so well through countless hours of courtly dances. Then the smoky fire swallowed her form as it had her husband's. She died without a sound.

Ilsabet heard Peto's oath, her sister's scream, but she felt only satisfaction. Her father had released Lorena from her duty, yet the woman had chosen to die anyway. Ilsabet regretted only that she had not known how much they both had loved the baron, and that Lorena's spirit would undoubtedly join the spectral menagerie that inhabited the castle. She made a mental note to avoid Lorena's room as she now did her mother's.

Soon after, Peto stood in front of the raised dining table at the end of the great hall. He was flanked by his generals, and some of the petty nobles of Sundell. His own troops ringed the hall, swords unsheathed, ready for use. "Baron Mihael Obour, come forward," Peto called.

Marishka turned to Ilsabet. "He uses Mihael's title!" she whispered. "A good sign."

Mihael moved forward, somewhat uneasily, Ilsabet noted with satisfaction. When he stood in front of the assembly, Peto continued, "Baron Mihael Obour, you have agreed to pledge your life to me?"

In response, Mihael knelt and kissed the boot of the victor. "I am yours to command," he said.

"Then this is my command. I ask that you take charge of this castle and the lands around it. That you rule in my place as I would rule, that you give me a monthly accounting of all matters of state. That you…"

Ilsabet saw Jorani standing at the other side of the room, waiting to swear to his new lord. He'd grown up in these walls with her father, and she wondered if he was remembering that past now. If he did, he gave no indication as he followed Mihael and pledged his faith.

The other nobles of Kislova followed, seeming almost eager to swear allegiance to their new lord. The generals went next, beginning with the troop commander, Raimundi, ending with old General Noire.

"Marishka Obour," Peto called next.

"Don't do it," Ilsabet whispered.

Marishka looked at Ilsabet as if certain she'd gone mad. Still weeping, she went forward. Trembling, she knelt and swore as the others had, then kissed the baron's foot. She was so overcome with grief that Peto had to help her to her feet. Just for a moment, he paused and looked into her face, as if noticing her great beauty for the first time.

Then came the moment Ilsabet had been waiting for. The audacity of her plan filled her with terror and excitement. Peto called her name. She did not move from her place in the crowd. "Ilsabet Obour!" he repeated.

She remained where she was, though the crowd parted around her, and Mihael glared at her.

"Come forward," Peto repeated, more gently, as if fear that kept her away.

"No," she replied simply.

Mihael moved to her side. "Father asked that we do this," he whispered fiercely.

"Father ordered that you do this," she replied in a whisper loud enough for those nearby to hear. "The rest of us can do as we choose.

Perhaps father's order is something Baron Peto should know." Whatever arguments Mihael might have raised vanished at the force of her threat.

"This is an embarrassment," he went on.

"Embarrassment! These are our conquerors. I will not pledge," she declared. Before the argument grew any hotter, she pulled her father's signet ring off her finger and held it up for all to see. "No one will ever take his place," she said, then threw it to the ground, cracking the crystal seal with the heel of her boot.

Peto seemed uncertain how to act. It was her age,

Ilsabet decided; that and her sex. If it had been Mihael who stood so boldly against Peto, he would be dead by now. Nonetheless, she fully expected death. She folded back the corners of her cloak and pulled her father's dagger from her belt. Holding it high, she cried, "The war is not over, Peto Casse of Sundell-not as long as there are those who revere my father's memory. If you wish me to pledge to save my life, I will do so, but in truth you know how much I will mean it."

Jorani moved to Peto's side and said, "She was the favorite of her father. No one loved him as she did."

"I see that," Peto answered, then faced Ilsabet. "I hope to one day have a daughter that so honors me," he declared and moved closer to her; but not within striking distance, Ilsabet noted with satisfaction. "I would not ask you to swear allegiance to me with his memory so keen in your mind. But until you do, you are confined to this castle. Regard it as your home."

"My home! Peto, it always has been my home. It will forever be!" She turned and stalked from the hall. Once out of sight, she leaned against the wall, tried to breathe deeply, and coughed. Her body was trembling, and her hands felt icy cold. She'd fully expected to share her father's fate.

Jorani joined her in the hall. "Your brother is inside, placating our uninvited host," he said. "May I walk with you to your chambers and talk with you a while?"

"To convince me to bow before him as my sister did?"

"Not at all. After I recovered from my shock, I realized that you did a very brave thing in there."

"Then, yes, come with me. There's no one whose company I cherish more."

The outer doors had been left open, but the dry warmth of the castle kept the fog at bay. Even so, the lower stairs were darkened by the damp, and beads of moisture had formed on the marble handrail. They climbed the stairs and passed through the cold hall to Ilsabet's chambers. Inside, she gave in to her weakness, wrapping herself in a

blanket and falling into a chair.

Jorani took a close look at her and rang the bell. Greta appeared soon after. "Bring some hot tea for your mistress," Jorani said. "And something to eat?"

Ilsabet nodded gratefully.

Jorani settled in the chair that faced hers. "I would wait to discuss some matters with you, Ilsabet, but I don't think time will mend your grief."

"You're going to tell me that I should go on with my life, or some other platitude?"

"Only that your hatred is misdirected. None of this was Baron Peto's fault; it was fate."

"It was the rebel I let live who warned Peto," Ilsabet blurted.

"No, some slip of a girl no older than you stole through the lines and heard your father and I planning the move. But even that isn't important. If Dark hadn't crossed the border to warn Peto, someone else would have done so. You are not responsible, believe me."

Ilsabet remembered the 'slip of a girl*. She'd judged the girl to be as harmless as Peto judged her to be. No use confessing her tragic stupidity to Jorani. He'd blame fate, not her.

"The point I am making is that most Kislovans welcome Baron Peto's victory," Jorani continued. "And if you oppose him so openly, you will not have the support of your people, or of his."

"Why should I care. I'll never rule."

"Fate combined with a certain bit of strategy and luck has a way of making the impossible real. You're the only one of his children who inherited his intelligence. Use it well and in time perhaps…"

She looked at him incredulously. She had never even considered that possibility. "What would you advise I do until then, swear my allegiance?"

"No. Be civil, even cordial to him, but never swear. He'll respect you that much more for your pride."

And the others that much less, she thought, but did not say it.

Exhausted by grief and tumult, Marishka left the hall early. By the time she reached her chamber, she was once more in tears. As she stepped inside, she saw Ilsabet waiting for her. Ilsabet pointed at her.

Marishka flinched, expecting to be struck. Though Ilsabet was smaller than she, Marishka had no taste for fighting and had been beaten often when young.

"I saw how you looked at him after you kissed his foot. Peto may be handsomer than your pet in the guards, but you didn't have to gape at him with such obvious longing when your father's ashes were still smoldering outside."

"I wasn't gaping at him, at least not that way."

"No? It didn't once cross your mind that you could make a match like Lorena's with father?"

Marishka's face reddened. "Get out," she said.

"Your son would inherit Sundell and Kislova," Ilsabet continued.

"Get out! I have no intention of marrying him or my 'pet' in the guards, or anyone."

Ilsabet gripped her sister's wrist, squeezing hard enough to bring tears to Marishka's eyes. "See that you stay away from him. The Obour family has its pride."

"I may have no choice!" Marishka blurted. "Mihael commented on the way the baron looked at me. If he gives me in marriage, what can I do?"

"A simple thing-refuse. Be certain you do."

"What if I'm forced to marry him? Mihael has that right."

"Then be certain Peto never loves you."

Even after Ilsabet had gone, Marishka wept, only now she had one more reason to add to the rest. If

Lorena were still alive, she could go to the woman for advice. Without her, Marishka felt utterly alone, for she'd had no other friends.

SIX

Two nights later, Peto and his generals sat in places of honor at a feast hosted by Mihael. Though the food had been prepared by Peto's own favorite cooks, it seemed dry and tasteless to him.

Since he'd witnessed Lady Lorena's death, he'd thought of it at the most inexplicable times. He used to find the sight of flames soothing, but not anymore. And tonight the glimpse of a serving girl's leg made him think of Lorena burning on the pyre.

When he'd assumed she'd immolated herself out of custom, he'd thought her death barbaric. When he'd learned that Janosk had released her from that duty, her death troubled him more. Did nothing stop the fanaticism of these people?

At least the son seemed level-headed. As for Mar-ishka, sitting so silently at her place at the table, he had to admit that he'd never seen a more lovely creature among all the noble maidens of Sundell.

Though her hair was piled high on her head and arranged in beautiful ringlets that glowed in the candlelight, though her eyes were accented with kohl, no amount of dress or makeup could disguise the expression of terrible sorrow on her face. Peto was the source of it, of course, but he longed to sit beside her, hold her hand and comfort her. In time, he thought, and turned to Mihael sitting beside him.

He looked as sad as his sister, and yet Peto thought there was almost a euphoria in the keen interest Mihael spent on all aspects the feast, and in the way he seemed to exude an unsure independence as he ordered the courses served, the entertainment to come forward. All of this made Peto wonder if Baron Janosk had been a tyrant to his children as well as his people.

"I'd like you to dismiss your remaining troops as soon as possible," Peto said, trying to make this sound like a suggestion rather than an order. "But I don't want the wounded to leave until they're well enough to travel."

"It won't make any difference. I suspect their own families will slip knives into most of them the first time they fall asleep."

"Was the rebellion so terrible?"

"The rebellion!" Mihael looked ready to laugh, and for the first time Peto realized that the thin youth had consumed far too much ale. "No, it was what we did. We…" Mihael stopped abruptly and looked down into his flagon, as if the amber liquid could drown his memories rather than make them more acute. "No need to speak of it. Though I'd hoped to one day rule in my father's place, I'm glad the fighting is over."

"And I, as well," Peto agreed. His estimation for the young man

was growing. "What will happen to your sisters now?" he asked.

"Marishka's life will change, and not for the better, I think. She was raised to understand that she would one day marry for reasons of state."

"So now she can marry for affection."

"It's not what Marishka expected. Do you understand?"

Peto stared openly at the girl, saw her glance his way, then looked down again. A blush was spreading across her cheeks. He signaled a servant to pour Mihael another flagon. "Elaborate if you would," he said.

"She has put all her likes and dislikes on hold while she waited for someone to be chosen for her. Then, she would have become exactly the sort of person her husband desired."

"She doesn't seem as passive as that," Peto commented.

"Believe me, it was a survival technique. I think she tolerated the isolation of our upbringing far better than I did."

"And Ilsabet?"

"You confined her to the castle. There'll be no change in her life because of that. She spends most of her time in her own chambers or the tower studying who knows what with Jorani. She never leaves unless she is… that is, unless she was asked to by Father or Jorani. Neither of my sisters really knows what happened out there during those months of war."

"You were there?"

"No, but I made it a point to hear, if only to understand the problems I would have inherited had he fallen in battle. Over half the people of Kislova are dead, two villages were completely wiped out-children and women as well as men. Yes, I'm glad the fighting is over."

Outstanding children, all of them, Peto thought-Mihael for his candor, Ilsabet for her bravery, and Marishka simply because of the shape of her lips, the beauty of her green eyes and golden hair. Peto had a weakness for beauty. He thought that ail men did, but only the most honest would ever admit it.

"Would I be violating some custom if I spoke a few words to Marishka?"

Mihael looked at him curiously, then with growing understanding. "It would put her mind at ease."

Peto was aware of the youth watching him as he moved down the table to a vacant chair next to Mar-ishka. Mihael had ambition; that much was certain. From the young man's expression, Peto assumed he was already considering the advantages of a match between them.

With Mihael's last words fixed in his mind, Peto began to speak to the girl. "I want you to know that I have no desire to disrupt your life. Continue to live here with your servants as long as you desire."

She looked at him, her green eyes showing the first tiny spark of happiness. "I had hoped you'd give me leave to stay," she said. "I've never lived anywhere else."

"How do you pass the time?"

She pointed to the bellpull next to the lord's chair. It was a beautiful design of flowers and ferns. "That was my first piece. I've done others as well. Lorena recently started a large tapestry with me, but I've no desire to finish it alone."

"I'm sorry she died. We don't have that custom in my land."

"Nor here," Marishka said. "It was her people who made her take the vow."

"But he released her."

"It was their custom. How could Lorena have gone back to her family with her husband dead?"

"Why did she have to go back at all?"

Marishka looked puzzled. Peto felt a twinge of disillusionment at how narrow the girl's goals must be. Even so, Peto had to admit that the thought of a match between them-some time from now when the grief of her father's death was over-would be both physically passionate and politically expedient.

Besides, the demands of Sundell often took him away from home. Better to have a beautiful, placid wife; a mother for his children who wouldn't contradict him.

And yet, it was with a pang of sadness that he thought honestly how ideal it would be if the spirited Ilsabet had some measure of her sister's beauty, or if she showed some signs of forgiving his necessary act, enough at least to attend the dinner.

Jorani's hidden tower room had no windows to alert anyone outside to its existence. Whatever air circulated in it came from cracks in its inside wall or rose from the base of the tower itself. It had the musty scent of river fog, and in the flickering lamplight Ilsabet saw bits of deep green moss growing in the corners.

Jorani had taken advantage of the diversion of the night's feast to show it to Ilsabet. She'd expected to see piles of scrolls and dust-covered spell books, silver amulets, precious gems, the magical lights of a wizard's den. Instead, she saw nothing more than cages of insects and bundles of dried plants, a handful of scrolls and a single ancient-looking book on the room's only table-a slab of marble mounted on the sort of granite the castle was built of.

"The baron who built the tower added this room to the final plans. According to the old accounts left here, he then killed the workers who knew of it. It would hold the source of his power, and the power of his descendants. Your grandfather used this room. Your

father had no skill at all for potions, so he utilized it through me. One day the knowledge contained here will be entrusted to you."

She felt confused. "Is this some kind of sorcery?"

Jorani's lips turned upward, as close to a real smile as his dour face could master. "Chemistry," he said. "The study of plants, of animals, of snakes, and of insects. There is my most treasured possession.

Be careful. Do not touch it."

Ilsabet peered into a blown-glass bubble hanging from one of the room's crossbeams, but it seemed to be filled with cobwebs, nothing more.

"Look closely," Jorani said.

Ilsabet did, squinting, finally making out the form of a tiny spider. It had spun its web so thickly that Ilsabet could hardly see it in the center of its container.

"Though the exit is uncovered, the spider is a lazy beast that has no inclination to leave the comfort of its home so long as I drop a fly into its web every day or so. No! Don't touch even the web, and don't put your face too close to the top of the bubble. It might think you are prey and attack."

As Ilsabet studied it, she had to admit it was a marvelous creature. Silver gray with white crisscross markings on its body and white bracelets at the end of each leg, it would practically disappear on a background of old wood or rotting fabric.

"It's the most dangerous specimen in this collection," Jorani told her. "A brush against its web will make a man ill. Put a pinch of the web in a man's food and he will have convulsions, mental confusion, fever. A bit more, and the victim falls into a coma and dies. Needless to say, the sting of the spider itself is lethal."

If it had moved in any way, Ilsabet would have fled the chamber in a moment. "Is there an antidote?"

"None, though it is believed that a person may build an immunity to the poison by touching or ingesting small pieces of the web. One of your ancestors experimented on prisoners with no success. They all died."

Ilsabet stared at the creature, so small, so retiring, its web gray like the fog that rose every night from the river.

"And here," Jorani went on, pointing to a number of glass vials arranged on a shelf, "are the more usual poisons-arsenic, bitter apricot, quicksilver, ergot, dried mushrooms…"

"What is this?" Ilsabet asked, pointing to what looked like a huge urn of sand that gave off a faint, sweet odor.

"The source of battle confusion. Deep inside the urn is a colony of cave ants. These creatures never see the light. When they do, they

become frantic, confused. They secrete a drug that rubs off on the sand. I grind their bodies and the sand together to a fine powder. Released upwind from an enemy camp just before a battle, the powder raises the enemy's fear. The ant colony is much smaller now, their sacrifice hardly worth it."

"Such simple things," Ilsabet said with disappointment.

"Most things are simple at their core. The real talent comes in the combinations. I'm considering mixing ergot with the ant sand to see if there is a way of driving troops into a frenzy in which they would see their comrades as the enemy and kill one another. But now that the war is over, it would have no use."

"Just knowing would be reason enough," Ilsabet said.

"I also have no subjects for my experiments. The rebels are all being freed."

Ilsabet said nothing. There would be great poverty in their battle-torn land, and criminals in plenty soon enough. She pictured murderers and thieves in their underground cells, driven mad by the powders and potions, afraid of their comrades, the dark, the cells themselves. What remarkably fitting justice. The thought made her tremble, and she turned toward Jorani with her face pale, her lips slightly parted. "When will you start to teach me?" she asked.

"As soon as Peto leaves. In the meantime, there are things about this castle that I can show you, child."

She did not correct him as she had Greta. He was her teacher. She would have to prove herself to him. She'd do so soon, she vowed.

The rebels had expected Baron Peto to be their savior. Instead, after killing the hated Janosk, he seemed too willing to compromise with the rest of the defeated. When they learned that Nimbus Castle would still hold a breathing Obour baron, they mustered what forces they could and issued an ultimatum. Baron Peto did not respond, and they attacked the following day.

It was a suicidal gesture. They'd known as much even before they marched onto the peninsula and taken their places in front of the castle gates.

Ilsabet stood in her father's chamber room, looking down at the motley group of soldiers. She wanted to see everything, to experience the thrill her father must have felt as he rode into battle. She'd even toyed with the idea of hiding her hair under a helmet, her lithe form under padded battle armor, and joining the troops, but it was all a fantasy, nothing more. She'd have been discovered in a moment. So she settled for the best possible vantage point and prayed that river fog would not be thick that evening.

The castle gates opened, and the Sundell and Kislovan soldiers,

united against a common enemy, marched out and fought side by side.

For a time, she was so lost in the emotions of the battle that she even forgot her hatred for Peto, or her fear for Jorani fighting somewhere on the field below her. Instead, she saw the obvious outcome by the numbers on both sides and thought with happiness of the captives that would be taken to sit miserably in the caverns below. Jorani would have no excuse for putting off her education any longer. They would learn together.

In the days since Ilsabet had visited Jorani's secret room, she had explored a multitude of such rooms and passages throughout the castle. There was, for example, the narrow corridor running from her father's chambers past the family's private rooms and the many guest rooms on both sides of it-with spy holes for each, she was pleased to note-ending finally in a pair of tiny, elegant rooms whose high arched windows faced the rising sun. Because of the placement of the outer walls, the windows were hidden from view from anywhere near the castle. As she stood there, she felt a sudden chill against her uncovered hands and thrust them deep into her pockets.

"It is said that one of your ancestors kept a slave girl secretly imprisoned here," Jorani said. "When his wife heard of it, she waited for him to leave the castle, then accused the girl's servant of some crime and had her killed. Though no one brought her food, the girl was able to obtain some water. She died of starvation not more than a day before her lover returned. It is said that if you go into the room at dawn, you can hear her weeping."

Ilsabet walked slowly toward the door, turning at the threshold. "Have you done so?" she asked.

Jorani nodded. "I heard nothing. Perhaps I do not have that gift. Come, I'll show you a way to the dungeon."

It descended in the same steep spiral as the known stairs, curving below them with little more height than that of an average man. Jorani had to walk in a crouch lest he hit his head on the staircase above him and alert some sharp-eared servant to his presence.

As they passed below ground level, the walls and stairs became damp and slippery. "Hold tight to the rail," Jorani cautioned. The slimy coating on it made Ilsabet thankful she was wearing gloves, but she wondered how well her grip on it would hold if she lost her footing.

The staircase ended below the level of the cells, then a narrow passage slanted upward at an easy angle. It had been designed that way on purpose, Jorani had told her earlier, so that anyone coming down the stairs could use a light, then extinguish it and travel on in the darkness, secure in the knowledge that the floor was smooth and

they would not fall.

Jorani did so now, and they used the passage as it was intended to be used, exiting in the back of a subterranean storage room. As they felt their way around the kegs and rotting chests of forgotten supplies, Ilsabet groped for Jorani's arm and whispered, "There's light ahead."

His fingers touched her mouth, then her ear. Understanding, she listened, and heard voices-one soft, almost consoling; a second, louder and angrier.

"The rebels…"

This time he covered her mouth. She understood and fell silent, following behind him in the near perfect dark.

When she could see his body as a dark shadow against the light, he stopped and found a convenient hiding place behind one of the abandoned cell walls. She stood beside him, and together they listened to Baron Peto discuss his plans with the rebel captives.

Baron Peto was explaining what safeguards he planned to make certain that Mihael Obour would not become the monster his father had been. He explained about the advisors that he would leave behind, the troops that would be loyal only to Sun-dell. He spoke persuasively, and given their circumstances, they seemed inclined to listen.

Til admit things have changed already," one said. ᵘBut the Obour family has been tainted by that tyrant."

"Tainted?" Peto asked. "Was Janosk's father not a wise ruler, Imre? I've spoken to Mihael Obour. He told me that he was sickened by his father's excesses and pleased to see the fighting ended. I believe him."

"Our lives are to hang on the word of boy?"

"Your lives hang on my word," Peto answered sharply. "I suggest you consider that along with the rest."

With that he left them, the servant traveling close behind, holding the torch high to light the way. Left once more in darkness, the men returned to their debate.

Ilsabet bristled when she heard one of the thugs call her family "tyrants" but found herself more disturbed by how much she approved of Peto's reply.

As soon as Peto and his servant retreated, Jorani and Ilsabet did the same. At the end, he showed her the peephole and tiny doorway into her own room, then took her back to the tower.

"What do you think of Peto's plans?" she asked him as soon as they were safe in his room.

"I think he defended your family most admirably," Jorani replied.

"If Kislova is a holding of Sundell, with their troops in our castle, his admirable defense of Mihael is irrelevant," she said with open fury.

"Don't ever act out of hatred, Ilsabet. Hatred makes one rash and inclined to mistakes. Your father's fate should be example enough."

She opened her mouth but held back the hasty and insolent reply. "Don't speak of him so lightly, Jorani," she said after a moment, her voice husky with apparent grief.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I know how much you loved him, but I think he would be the first to agree with me."

"Perhaps," she whispered and sniffed as if fighting back tears. Hatred made one see things clearly, she thought. For all his talk that she might one day rule, Jorani now served Mihael. Avenging her father's death, and restoring the family's honor was her duty alone.

She'd show them all what "a slip of a girl" could do. And she knew exactly where to begin.

Dark had been well compensated for his service to Sundell and likewise invited to remain in Nimbus Castle. He'd sent the money to his family but chose to remain in the castle not out of any love for the place but because he had no desire to ever become the object of pity to his family. He kept to his little room during the day. At night, he would feel his way down the open walkway and along the flight of stairs that led the kitchen. There he would sit among the servants listening to their conversation. He was hardly happy, but he was more content than he'd thought he'd ever be.

The sun had left the room hours ago, its warmth replaced by the chill of night. He'd just been getting ready for his evening walk when he heard the grating of metal on metal, felt a rush of cool air. Had he means to speak, he would have asked who was there. Instead he waited.

A woman whispered his name. He smelled a beautiful scent like the blue meadow flowers in the hills above his home, yet it brought only fear and the terrible memory of a perfumed wind that had rolled across the battlefield. It had driven horses wild, driven men mad.

"Dark." The voice was louder now, little-girl sweet, sweet like the flowers. He knew the voice all too well.

Ilsabet, he thought, and with the thought came a return of everything he'd suffered at the hands of that family. The memory of the pain became somehow the pain itself. He tore at the bandages covering his eyes. Bending his scarred fingers made him cry out, a long terrible sound, barely human.

"Dark," she said and laughed. "Darkdarkdarkdark-dark…"

He lunged for her, but she stepped out of his way. "Darkdarkdarkdarkdark…" she called, laughing.

The rage was wrong, was deadly, but he had no choice except to give in to it and follow her. Blind, unable to call for help, he ran after

her voice, heedless of the wind blowing his hair, the damp, slippery stones beneath his feet.

"Darkdarkdarkdark…"

He thought of nothing until she stopped calling his name and he realized he was outside and lost. He groped about. His scarred hand touched a rail for just a moment. Then someone pushed him from behind, and he went over, falling, falling, screaming finally just before he hit the ground.

Ilsabet would have loved to remain, to watch the servants discover him, to claim victory for his death, but it would be impossible. Instead, she retreated through a nearby chamber and into the passage that led to her own room. Once there, she changed quickly into one of her more colorful gowns. If any servant suspected her part in Dark's "accident" she would be here writing a letter to a distant cousin in Tygelt.

She wondered if the deed had caused some change in her. She studied her face in her mirror. There was nothing save the triumphant smile she would have to hide when questioned and the added color to her cheeks-caused no doubt by her quick return to her chambers. She brushed back her hair, then held her hands close to the fire. When they came to question her, there would be no sign that she had ever left the warmth of her room.

She heard a knock and was ready. "Come in," she called and looked up from her writing desk, frowning when she saw Peto, looking even more confused when Mihael followed him. "Is something wrong?" she asked.

"There's been a death," Baron Peto said. He looked at her carefully as Mihael added the details.

Ilsabet tried to register just the right amount of surprise, but she could not hide the pleasure she felt at hearing the account of her deed spoken aloud. She looked up at Peto and shook her head. "I am well aware of why he resided in my home, Baron. I can hardly be expected to mourn him."

"So you might be expected to harm him?" Peto asked.

"If I had the opportunity, which I did not. I've been here all afternoon. My servant's been in an out a number of times."

"So Greta says," Mihael commented.

Aware for the first time of how her brother's loyalties had shifted, Ilsabet glared at him. He seemed about to add something, then apparently thought better of it.

"I've been here all afternoon," Ilsabet went on. "Put a truth spell on me and I will still say the same thing. But I will not pretend to mourn the man's death."

"I understand," Peto said. "But remain in these rooms until we've

spoken to the servants about this."

"Remain here? It's ail I do anyway, Baron. I have no desire to walk these halls and see your servants and your guards pretending to serve me."

After Peto left, Mihael asked, "How long will you hate him, Ilsabet?"

"Someone has not forgotten the promise she made," she replied, then turned her back on him, laughing aloud as soon as the door closed behind him. Alone now, she began to finish her letter. On the edge of her vision she saw a shadow move through her room, but when she turned to find the source, nothing was there.

She opened her mouth to call for Greta, then cut off the sound. Children were afraid of the dark and the things that took their strength from darkness.

No! I will not be a silly child any longer, she wrote in her journal that night. I will make my heart and mind hard and fearless, cold as stone, cold as an avenger's heart and mind should be.

Nonetheless, she slept the night with a candle burning at her bedside.

SEVEN

The following evening Marishka sat brushing her long hair in front of a mirror. The color of new copper coins, it fell in soft waves that covered her shoulders. She looked beyond her reflection at the gowns hanging from hooks on the dressing room wall. Though the ones less frequently used grew dusty on the open hooks, they were safe from the mildew that invaded every piece of fabric or wood left in the closets of Nimbus Castle. These had once been her mother's dresses, given to her by her father on her sixteenth birthday. With the gift came a request that she wear one from time to time to remind him of his love.

Perhaps her mother and father were together now in the afterlife, but if so, what of Lady Lorena, who had also loved him? The gods must have ways of sorting these complications out, she thought, and put the matter from her mind, certain she was not clever enough to solve the matter herself.

She turned away from the mirror and went to finger the beautiful silks and taffetas, the gorgeous thin-spun woolen capes and shrugs and shawls, some trimmed with gold and precious gems, worth more than a Pirie merchant made in a year. She wondered if she could ever bear to wear the clothes again.

A knock on her door was such a rare occurrence that she flinched, then ran to it, pulling it open before asking who was there.

"May I speak with you?" Baron Peto asked.

She stepped back, eyes downcast, hiding all the clashing emotions his presence aroused. "Of course," she said. "Will you come in?"

He sat in a chair beside her dressing table while she took the one she'd been using. From where she sat she could see her own reflection, and noted how obvious the flush on her cheeks had become.

"I haven't had a chance to meet privately with you since I came here. I want to ask you if you have any requests to make of me."

"Requests?" No one had ever asked her such a question.

"Your brother tells me that you have some affection for a young guardsman who served your father. If you wish, I could arrange for him to stay here. If he deserves it later, perhaps even a promotion."

Marishka began to understand. If she'd been less embarrassed, she might have laughed. "Before he came here, he'd never been away from home. He was lonely, and so was I. Now that the fighting has ended, he's going back to his village. I hope they welcome him."

Peto thought of Mihael's dire warning about the fate of his father's troops. "He could stay if you wish," Peto said.

"He wouldn't want to," she replied.

"I won't be in Kislova long, but I would like to take the baron's place as best I can," Peto said. "I need to know the customs of your land, the stories told by its people. Could you help me learn?"

"I really haven't been to any place beyond Pirie, and that is only a few miles north of here. You could ride over to see it for yourself," she said.

"Would you go with me?"

"It wouldn't be wise, not yet, at least. Tempers toward my family are still so raw. And now that the rebel is dead, things will be worse."

"All the more reason to show you have nothing to feel guilty about. We'll ride tomorrow at noontime. If anyone questions you, I'll tell them I ordered it."

He took her hand. She thought at first that he was going to kiss it, but he only sat holding it, looking at her face as if trying to discover some important fact about her. The attention made her feel flustered and terribly self-conscious. She tried to meet his gaze, and did not quite succeed.

He left soon after, and as she closed the door behind him, she thought she heard something moving in her room. She turned from the door and picked up a poker from the hearth, then stood very still, her eyes searching the dark corners under her bed and dressing table, hoping it wasn't a rat. Gradually she relaxed. The sound must have been caused by a draft from the open door rustling the skirts of the gowns hanging on the wall.

With tears in her eyes, Marishka sat at her dressing table. Mihael was clearly making plans for her, and she didn't have strength to resist. She wished for the first time that she weren't the beautiful one, the pliant one. She longed for her sister's stubbornness-and her spirit.

Imre lay in the corner of the dark cell, staying awake and on guard while his companions slept. The heavy length of board he held had already killed three river rats bold enough to invade the cell. He'd wedged their bodies into the crack in the stone wall where they served as both a meal for and a barrier to their aggressive comrades. He could hear the tiny jaws gnawing, and thought of the sharp teeth ripping shreds of flesh and fur from their own dead. Not a pleasant thought, but the noises-the only noises in the darkness-were hard to ignore.

Their squeals and gibbering grew louder as they began fighting over the remains of their dead. One of the tiny bodies was pulled into the crack and a rat broke through the barrier and scurried across the floor.

The crusts of dried bread Imre had been using as bait rustled, and he struck with the board but did not hear a satisfying thud. Instead,

the rat leapt for his face, biting deep into his cheek.

He cried out, and the rat disappeared in the darkness.

"What is it?" Dorje called.

"A rat bit me. Watch yourself. I've never known them to be this nasty before."

"I have." It might have been the panic in Imre's voice that made Dorje continue, detailing the night that a dozen of the vermin had invaded his family's cottage. From there the story grew outlandish, climaxing with his mother chasing the pack with a knife as they tried to carry off the baby. "I swear it's true, every word," Dorje said, starting to laugh.

Imre tried to join him, but couldn't. The bite burned, burned so terribly he thought his face was on fire. He pressed his palm against the cold stones, then brought it to his cheek to try to soothe the fiery pain. The burning only grew worse and began to spread toward his eyes.

"Dorje!" he called. "I think the rat was infected."

"You hardly had time to catch a disease from it," Dorje countered, and moved to his side.

"Poisoned, then. I'm sure that if we had some light I couldn't see out my left eye."

"Then be thankful it's dark," Dorje replied. He ran his hand over Imre's face. "It does seem a bit swollen. Should I call a guard?"

"Do it," Imre said. His tongue felt numb, his eye seemed on fire, and it took enormous control for him to keep from clawing at it. "We have to kill the beast."

As Dorje called out, the other prisoners began to stir. One shouted and a moment later began to scream. The guard came running, his single torch unable to expose all the corners of the cell.

"Bring more light," Dorje said. He raised Imre's head and pointed across the cell to the third prisoner.

The bite on the man's hand was bleeding, the flesh around it swelling so quickly that blood seeped through his skin. "A rat bit them both," Dorje said.

"Rat?" The guard looked from one man to the other, then handed the torch to Dorje and called for more light.

Dorje held the torch close to the crack but it made little difference to the vermin behind it. Though their fur and whiskers were singed, they swarmed into the cell and rushed toward the men.

The remaining prisoners in Imre's cell were awake, warning comrades in the adjoining cells. They all moved close to the cell doors, stomping their boots on the vermin while screaming for the guards to let them out. Imre managed to get to his feet and join the others before the rats reached him, but the other wounded man was not so

lucky. The rats covered his body, biting fiercely, oblivious to his struggles or his screams. He was dead before the guards managed to get the cells open. The rats charged them as well, biting two before prisoners and jailers alike retreated down the dark slippery passageway to the safety of the underground guardhouse.

They crowded together behind the heavy wooden doors. Dorje pulled open the tiny security door and, secure behind its heavy mesh screen, watched as the rats turned on one another.

The attack was over as quickly as it had begun. Dead rats covered the passageway and the cell floors. A few still picked at the carcasses and the body but they moved weakly, as if the poison that had infected Imre also infected them.

One of the guards retrieved a torch dropped during their flight to the guardhouse, lit it, and made his way upstairs to warn the household.

Dorje relaxed for the first time in an hour and went to tend the guards. "Cut open the bite and suck out the poison," he suggested.

The guard looked at Dorje as if he were insane. "Look how it's already swelling," he said, pointing at his leg.

"AH the more reason to act quickly," Dorje replied, then crouched beside the man. He thought he recognized the victim; someone from his own village who had joined Baron Janosk's troops years before. Dorje doubted the soldier would remember him, for Dorje had been hardly more than a child then, but village ties were strong-nearly as strong as the hatred between rebel and soldier-and made him work more diligently.

Ilsabet sat in Jorani's chambers, an illuminated manuscript open on the table before her. It was an old tract, advice given to a son and heir by his father just before he died. The printing was so beautiful and the paper so brittle that she took longer to turn the pages than to read the words on them. She had opened the book to this page before leaving the room and returned to it as quickly as she could after laying out the poisoned bait in the dungeons below.

The hawks screeched a warning, and a moment later Greta, her back pressed against the wall, slipped past them. The woman was out of breath from running up the long flight of stairs. Wisps of dull brown hair had escaped their pins and brushed her round red face.

"Ilsabet! I thought I'd find you here," Greta exclaimed. "There are rats swarming the dungeons. They attacked the prisoners and the guards. We are supposed to take care here as well." She held out a pair of heavy leather boots that laced to the knee. They were the thickest and tallest ones Ilsabet owned. "Put these on and take care. Don't let them bite you. They're infected."

Ilsabet looked evenly at her. "How do you know?"

"They bit two of the prisoners and one of the guards. A prisoner died."

"Died?" Ilsabet's eyes grew bright and hands shook.

Greta interpreted the emotion as fear and laid a hand on her arm. "It's all right," she said soothingly. "There's been no sign of rats aboveground."

"Where are the wounded now?"

"In the kitchen, I believe. The healer is drawing out the poison with boiling water."

Ilsabet frowned. "The kitchen! Aren't those Peto's prisoners?"

"Only for the moment. They say Baron Peto intends to release them as soon as the wounded man can travel. I'm going to go down now to see what help I can be."

"I'll come with you." For the first time, Ilsabet tried to display some fear. "I don't want to be alone. Just let me put the book away and change my boots. No, go on ahead. I'll be all right."

When she reached the kitchen, Jorani was kneeling beside the wounded rebel, experimenting with salves on the man's swollen face while the healer looked on and offered what advice he could. When Jorani found a salve that seemed to work, he moved to the wounded guards and used it on them as well.

As she stood in the corner watching Jorani tend the wounded, Ilsabet savored her triumph. None of the men were supposed to get out of their cells alive, but at least the combination she'd used on the rats had worked as she'd intended.

When he noticed her watching him, Jorani frowned. Understanding his concern, she shook her head slowly, implying that she'd had nothing to do with the attack.

She lied, not because she thought he wouldn't understand the reason for what she had done, but because she feared he would stop her education before it had begun if he suspected her of experimenting so soon.

And in spite of her success, she knew he'd have a right to punish her. She was young and inexperienced. The molds and poisons of Jorani's chamber were lethal. A wrong move and she would learn no more.

A wrong move and she would never have her revenge.

Greta joined her. "Would you like to come help me pack provisions for their journey?"

"Provisions!" Ilsabet whispered. "They attack us, and we send them home with supplies?"

"Enough for their trip. They're taking a conciliatory message from Baron Peto and your brother to their villages."

"I doubt I'd be much help," she said, but followed Greta anyway to a corner where the cook was loading cheese and dried meat into a sack. A second sack of the morning's bread was already full, waiting to be tied shut.

Ilsabet reached into her pocket and pulled out a white linen kerchief she'd carried to the dungeons to poison the rats' food. She'd just begun to unfold it above the bread sack when one of the servants came for it.

She moved quickly out of his way, thinking she'd be pressing her luck if she tried to kill them again. She threw the kerchief into the lit stove, pausing to watch it flare. "I'm going to sit with my sister a while. You know what she thinks of rats," she said to Greta, then left the servants to their work.

When Marishka had been a toddler, a river rat managed to sneak into her room. It waited until her wet nurse went to sleep, then slipped into her cradle, pressing its furry body close to her bare chest, licking the milk from her tiny pursed lips.

Sometime in the middle of the night, the nurse awakened and came to check on her. Seeing the rat, she let out a terrible scream. It startled Marishka and the rat, which bit her on the lip.

She was now left with a tiny scar near the corner of her mouth. Each time she looked at it, she recalled exactly how the woman had shrieked, how the animal's teeth had felt as they sank into her flesh, how the servant had beat at her bedcoverings then killed the beast with a fire iron.

When she had heard about the rats swarming through the dungeons, Marishka had summoned two of her maids. Hours had passed, and there had been no sign of the animals aboveground, so she dismissed them, took a fireplace poker, and sat in the center of her bed, determined to remain on guard all night if need be.

Someone knocked. She ran and threw the door open, relieved to see her sister. "I've come to sit with you," Ilsabet said. "I know how terrified you are of rats."

Marishka made Ilsabet sit beside her on the bed. "Stay with me tonight," she whispered. "There's plenty of room in the bed, and you've always been so brave about such things."

Ilsabet kissed her sister's cheek and laughed. "Marishka, it's all right. Even the dungeons are quiet now. Whatever infuriated the beasts seems to have vanished as mysteriously as it appeared."

"Really?"

"The infected rats are all dead. They say there's over a hundred bodies in the tunnels."

Marishka took a deep breath, let it out, and smiled. "Stay the

night with me anyway, like you used to," she said. "I've hardly seen you or Mihael since…"

"Since father died?" Ilsabet asked, then went on. "I haven't seen Mihael either, but I assumed you did. After all, I'm the enemy here."

"No one sees you that way. All our servants say that what you did was very brave. I wish I'd had the courage to stand up to Peto. Then maybe things would be different now."

"Different?"

Marishka frowned, trying to think of some way to explain without making Ilsabet angry. "Maybe if I'd shown some defiance, Mihael and Baron Peto wouldn't be bartering over me as if I were a spoil of war."

"Bartering? Are you for sale, sister?"

"Mihael seems to think so. As for Peto, well at least he's polite enough to try getting to know me before he makes a bid for me. What do you think of him?"

"I think he murdered our father," Ilsabet retorted. "You talk about him like a girl falling in love."

"I'm not!" Marishka insisted. "I meant, what sort of ruler do you think he'll be?"

"I'm not sure I should answer, just in case you do fall in love with him and repeat it."

Marishka stared at her sister, then seeing the hint of a smile on Ilsabet's thin mouth, she flung a pillow at her. "Tell me!" she demanded.

"All right. Peto thinks father was a ruthless barbarian, and the rebels, too. Kislovans-peasants and nobles alike-share the same blood, and the same passion for hate and love. In the end blood will win. Peto's rule will be short and tragic. He deserves what comes."

Marishka considered this but could reach no conclusion. Perhaps Ilsabet was right, but she was certainly at odds with Mihael's opinion. "What should I do?" she asked.

"Just what I said before, Marishka. Do what you're told, since you have no choice, but see that he doesn't fall in love with you."

Ilsabet looked at her so strangely that Marishka changed the subject. They slept together in the big bed, as they had so often when they were younger. She woke in the morning as her door was closing. Ilsabet had gone.

When Ilsabet reached her own chambers, she bolted the door behind her and went to the cupboard beside her bed. She rummaged behind some old scarves and ribbons and pulled out a wooden box. She opened it, inhaling a musty stench, then carefully lifted a bundle of soft wool fabric, unfolding a blue-and-gold cape and the white wool tunic hidden inside it. The stains of her father's blood had grown darker, and there was a thin coating of mold on the ones that had not

yet dried.

She knew that if she wanted to keep the garment intact, she ought to wash it, but she wanted to see the stains there and through them to remember her father's head rolling away from his falling body, to see Peto above him, victorious, and gloating in his victory.

Someday, she thought, I will look at him that way. Someday I will have my revenge.

"At what cost?" These words of doubt were spoken an almost-familiar voice-feminine, gentle, and firm.

Had Ilsabet not been certain that she was alone in this room, she would have whirled and faced the intruder. Instead, Ilsabet pretended not to have heard the spectre. She began to fold the bloodstained tunic into the center of her father's cape. As she did, the stains brightened and began to spread, dripping from the woolen folds onto the polished wooden floor. Ilsabet stifled a scream and dropped the tunic, then looked down at her hands.

They were coated with new blood, which dripped from some hidden source off the tips of her fingers, leaving black stains on the brilliant green satin of her robe. The hallucination stole the breath from her lungs, and her heart pounded.

"At what cost?" the voice repeated.

Then she did whirl, but there was no one there at all.

PART II

THE DANCE OF DEATH

EIGHT

Jorani had been nine years old when he first entered Nimbus Castle. He had no title then, his family no wealth. His father played the flute and dulcimer, his uncle the drums, while his mother danced and sang. His duty was to keep watch over their instruments, and to bring new ones when needed.

He was sitting at the side of the hall, engrossed in the beauty of his mother's singing, when out of the corner of his eye he spied a boy a few years older than he moving toward the family's pipes, lutes, and drums. He did not notice the boy's rich clothing. If he had, it would have made no difference. Everyone in the castle seemed wealthy to him, which made his family's scant possessions all the more precious.

Jorani waited until the thief picked up the set of carved wooden pipes, the most beautiful instrument his family owned and his own favorite to play. Jorani faced him. " Put that down," he ordered.

Instead the boy turned to run. Jorani sprang. He had expected the boy to put up a silent fight and run as soon as he broke away. Instead, the youth, who turned out to be considerably more muscular than he, let out a terrible scream, then got the better of him and dragged him through the center of hall to the baron's table.

"The gypsy brat attacked me, Father," the boy declared. "I want him executed."

The baron stood. His ice-blue eyes stared with such intensity that it took all of Jorani's courage not to look away. "You attacked my son?" the baron asked.

"I didn't know he was your son, Sire," Jorani said. "He seemed about to make off with one of our instruments. It was my duty to protect my family's goods."

"You thought my son was a thief?"

Jorani sensed some amusement in the baron's tone and tried to take comfort in it. "I only knew what my responsibility was, Sire," he replied.

"Please explain, Janosk," the baron said to his son.

"In private," the boy whispered.

"You're the one who made the matter public," the baron retorted.

"I wanted to play it. I would have put it back."

"I see." The baron focused on Jorani once more. "Do you play?" he asked.

Jorani nodded, picked up the pipes, and played a slow, mournful song.

"Will you teach my son to play?"

Jorani looked up at his father, saw him nod eagerly, and

understood. They were poor people. This might give them a chance for more.

The baron seemed to read his mind. "Will you?" he asked more gently.

"Will your son let me teach him?" he responded.

Janosk nodded.

"Then I will do it," he said.

The future baron proved to be a far better friend than a musician, but by the time the baron discovered this, he could not have separated the two boys. In time, Jorani forgot the ambitions of youth. Since then, he'd moved from commoner to knight to lord with his own magnificent estate less than a day's ride south of the castle. He was proud of his lands, and it pained him to think how rarely he visited them.

The long friendship with Janosk had made him too accepting of the man's faults, too willing to placate the ruler. When the first small insurrection had begun, he'd urged compromise. When Janosk hadn't listened, he'd advised him in matters of war-well, but not well enough.

After Janosk's death, he'd looked to Janosk's children and the future. Marishka had beauty but all the will of a reed in the wind. Mihael had ambition but lacked intelligence. So Jorani had turned to the one heir who most resembled his friend in temperament. The advice he'd given Ilsabet, while true, was premature.

And he suspected she had already begun to act on it.

As soon as he left the wounded men, he went to his hidden room and studied each of his bottles. He detected nothing missing in the most likely ones. But then, only a little would be needed. If she shook the bottles afterward, the powders would expand to fill the missing space.

It had to have been her, but if so, she had done it slyly-never giving him a hint of her plans, never gloating afterward. He sat at his table with his hands clasped beneath his chin, and debated what to do.

He had reached no decision when the hawks screeched a warning, giving him only enough time to climb the stairs, hide the entrance under his rug, and admit a servant waiting anxiously outside with a summons from Baron Peto.

He'd expected to be questioned, and was surprised the summons had taken so long. He was, after all, the most likely suspect in the bizarre event.

He met the baron in the same chamber where he and Janosk had often discussed political matters. As he expected, Peto went right to the point.

"I know you have some experience in the matter of poisons," Peto

said. "Can you think of anyone else who might possess that knowledge?"

No matter how much Jorani respected this man, his loyalties remained with Janosk's kin. He shook his head.

"Ilsabet is your pupil, is she not?"

"In academics, Baron. I teach her history and philosophy, not the use of poisons. Indeed, much of what I know myself is only theoretical."

"The rebels told me of your skill."

Jorani took a deep breath, looked at the baron's eyes, and replied, "My reputation is similar to that of an old warrior-much exaggerated."

Peto smiled. "As were your castle defenses, I recall." He unwrapped a piece of dried bread and placed it on the table. "We found this in the cell, dragged in by one of the poisoned rats. What do you make of it?"

Jorani held the bread up to the light and saw a fine powder coating the crust. He brushed it onto a piece of white parchment and studied it closer. "There appear to be two different substances in this dust, Baron. One is ergot and could be there naturally. The other is unknown to me. I know of drugs that drive the victim insane, but this powder does not resemble any of them."

"I understand that it is called devil's cup, and that your servants harvest the plant on your own lands."

"I'll confess to a lie, but not to a deed I did not commit."

"Then if it was not you, tell me who knows enough to have done the poisoning."

"I don't know."

"Until you think of an answer, you are confined to your chambers. There'll be guards outside with orders to check on you frequently to be certain you stay there."

Upstairs, Jorani took what comfort he could from the consequences of Ilsabet's rash acts. He had his hawks for company and a lovely view of the river and forests; all of this far better than the fate he would have ordered had he been in Peto's position.

However, he was pleased that Ilsabet had exposed herself too soon. Peto would never relax his defenses now. He would have tasters for food prepared under the watchful eyes of his faithful guards.

And in time, he hoped, Ilsabet would abandon her efforts at revenge.

Baron Peto was a benevolent ruler, but Marishka was pleased to see he was no fool. A dozen of his most trusted guards rode behind them, and she and the baron were flanked by four of his best archers. Nonetheless, as they neared the town, Peto must have sensed how

anxious she'd grown because he reached over and patted her hand. "It's all right," he said. "We're not the enemy here."

Maybe he wasn't, but she couldn't claim the same.

Pirie, a town of six hundred, was the only large settlement in the vicinity of Nimbus Castle. Located on the Arvid, it relied on fishing, shipping, and farming to survive. Its well-tended wharfs were the largest on the river, and the inn and rooming house offered shelter to travelers on road and river alike.

As they neared town, Marishka saw rebel banners still defiantly flying from some tile rooftops, and belatedly realized that her dress was the same color. She also noticed that there was a crowd on the wharf and that it seemed to be growing larger as they approached.

She turned to Peto, intending to say some word of warning, but didn't have to. His relaxed disposition had vanished. He sat stiffly in the saddle, his hand on the hilt of his sword. The men around her adopted his manner. They were prepared for the worst, but seemed committed to going forward to meet the crowd.

When they reached the wharf, two of the villagers came forward. One had a wound on his cheek. The cut was red, the flesh around it inflamed. After his treatment by the castle healers, Peto could not understand why he looked so angry.

"It's good to see you still on your feet," Peto said.

"It's good that I am," Imre responded. He moved closer and added in a low tone. "I've been trying to calm everyone down, but they're convinced the rats that attacked us were poisoned."

"Stay here with the guards," Peto said to Marishka and dismounted, focusing his attention on Imre. "I would not leave you standing here when you must still be in pain. Let's sit down somewhere and see if I can help soothe things over."

With a shrug, Imre led the baron into a crowded tavern. Speaking loudly so that even the rowdies near the door could hear, Peto explained how he intended to govern through Mihael Obour. He also explained again what safeguards he would leave in place.

"What about Dark!" someone called out.

"And what about the rats?" another added.

"My men are searching the dungeons today, trying to find the source of the poison," Peto promised.

"You won't have to look past the Obours," someone else called and pointed beyond the open door to Marishka sitting on her horse.

"I'll do whatever is necessary, but only after I'm sure someone was to blame," the baron repeated more emphatically.

A woman pushed her way to the front of the assembly. She wore a shapeless black mourning dress and tattered veil and her eyes were bright with grief and rage. "My son was devoured by the rats in

Nimbus Castle. I want to talk to the Obour."

Peto had seen Marishka's fear. He also knew she rarely left her own rooms since he'd taken up residence in the castle. "She's been in seclusion since her father died. I'll find the guilty party," he said.

"I'll question her myself," the woman replied, turned and walked toward the door. Some of the villagers followed. The guards, on alert since the baron had gone inside, drew their swords but were uncertain how to act against one old woman in mourning clothes.

"I wish to speak to the girl. I want to ask her who killed my son," she said as she walked toward them. The guards did not step aside.

When she tried to push her way through, one of them grabbed her, pinning her arms. "We don't want to hurt you," the guard said.

"Let me talk to her!" the woman shouted then kicked the man's shin.

"She has a right!" someone else called out.

"Let her through!" This shout was accompanied with a thrown clod of half-frozen horse manure, which hit the guard in the face. More pelted Mar-ishka. Her horse shied sideways, pushing the line of guards against the crowd. The woman fell out of the guard's grip and screamed.

"Cease this madness!" Baron Peto cried from the tavern door. "Hasn't there been enough blood spilled in this land? Are you all so hungry for more?"

"I've lost a son!" the woman retorted.

"And I a father," Marishka blurted. She looked astonished at her boldness and painfully self-conscious of the attention her words received. Nonetheless, she went on, "But I am glad the fighting is ended. I've sworn allegiance to Baron Peto, and I will honor that oath."

Dismounting, she went to where the woman knelt on the ground and offered her hand. "If you still wish to speak to me, I will listen, though I know nothing that can help you," she said.

The woman let Marishka help her to her feet, then spit in her face. "If you know nothing, you're of no use to me, Obour," she said, then pushed her way through the crowd.

Peto regretfully watched the woman go. He had hoped that Marishka's words, spoken so obviously from her heart, would have alleviated some of the tension in this town. He'd been far too optimistic when he'd asked her to ride. Yet he was glad he had, for he'd seen some spark of assertiveness in the girl, and the attraction that had been solely for her beauty had grown suddenly deeper.

Here was a woman he could love, and from the way she looked at him when she spoke her brave words, someone who could in time come to love him.

Their ride back to Nimbus Castle had none of the casual, almost frivolous, air of their trip out. Every time Peto looked at Marishka, he noticed the dirty smudges on her wool cape. At least he knew the truth now. He could not leave Kislova soon, but he felt far less regret at being away from the people of Sundell than he'd expected. Marishka would be near.

NINE

When she heard that Peto had imprisoned Jorani, lisabet wrote a formal plea to the baron, asking him to release her teacher. His reply, also written, was polite but firm. Jorani would stay where he was until the poisoner was found.

Ilsabet waited a few more days before sending word that she would be down for dinner and requested an audience afterward to plead Lord Jorani's case in person. She chose a black gown that made her pale skin and hair look exotic rather than faded and went downstairs, sitting beside her sister.

As was his custom, the baron had entertainment between the main course and the sweets, this time a singer who'd sung for Baron Janosk on many occasions. While the diners listened, servants carried in a tray of pastries from the kitchen. Though the baron was by custom served first, Ilsabet reached back and grabbed the top piece from the tray, laughing so sweetly at her sister that her impoliteness was seen as childish exuberance, not a formal slight of their new lord.

Ilsabet took a bite, gave a strangled cry, and spit out the piece. Fire filled her mouth and throat, making it hard to breath, to speak. Tears rolled down her face as she grimaced in pain. No sooner had the agony hit, however, than an uncontrollable rage came. Unfocused at first, it was soon directed at the person she hated most.

Consequences be damned! She would kill the baron now; kill him and be done with it. Why wait? Why scheme when she had the means right in front of her? Pushing herself to her feet, she picked up a waterglass and broke it on the side of the table. With the edge held out like a dagger in front of her, she lunged for Peto.

Everything happened so quickly that she almost reached him before the baron's guards rushed forward. Her rage gave her terrible strength, and it took four to subdue her, one of whom was slashed across the arm while trying to wrest the makeshift weapon from her hands. At Peto's order, she was carried kicking and screaming from the dining hall to her chambers.

Servants tied her to her bed. Someone pried open her clenched teeth and poured a liquid tasting of honey and poppy down her throat, but the elixir brought no comfort. She screamed in rage. More liquid followed. This time she bit down on a hand, and blood filled her mouth.

The taste of an enemy! The taste of vengeance!

The baron's face hovered above her. She growled, spit blood and saliva at him and screamed again.

She felt as if she were buried in the belly of some terrible beast,

her emotions magnified in its primitive mind, her hidden urges propelling it to act, but her bonds making action impossible.

Another sweet infusion. This time the potion made her sleepy but did little to calm the burning in her mouth and throat, which seemed to be spreading through her body, borne in her blood.

Peto stood at the end of the bed and looked down at Ilsabet. She lay with her arms and legs tightly tied to the four posts. Even through the heavy woolen gown and underskirts, he could see how thin she was. As he watched the healer go about his work, the potions calmed her but did nothing to neutralize the poison in her system. He felt a tremendous guilt.

The sweet she had stolen from the plate had been meant for him. Ilsabet coughed, her eyes still watered, and her lips were turning a pale shade of ash blue.

"What's happening?" Peto asked the healer.

"Her throat is swelling shut," the man replied. "I'm doing what I can."

Not enough! Peto thought. Fearful of the outcome and the terrible future of his conscience should she die, he turned to Shaul. "Bring Lord Jorani here," he ordered. He spoke loud enough that Ilsabet could hear him, then moved out of her line of sight, hoping his absence would help calm her.

"Is she going to be all right?" Marishka asked.

Her voice surprised him. Until she spoke, Peto had forgotten she was in the room. She stood by the door, out of the way of the men trying to save her sister's life. Now he focused on Marishka-her clasped hands, her too-bright eyes.

"Don't cry," he whispered and held out his arms.

She stepped into them and began to sob.

Jorani seemed to take forever to answer the summons, but he came prepared. The elixir he gave Ilsabet cooled the fire in her throat, as well as the one in her mind. Even so, it was some minutes before she could force more than a trickle of air into her lungs. When she exhaled, she started to scream, and cut off the sound.

"Let out the rage," Jorani said to her. "You have to."

She did as he said. Each cry calmed her as if the sounds were emptying the mind of the emotions that caused them.

Hours passed. Ilsabet's voice grew hoarse, her throat sore. Finally, when the cries subsided to frightened whimpers, Jorani ordered the bonds cut. She immediately hugged her teacher, making him stay after the others left. "Do you think he'll lock you up again now that I'm better?" she whispered.

"You little fool! If you'd taken a bigger bite or if Peto had waited

longer to send for me, I'd be heaping wood on your funeral pyre now," he said without real anger.

The moment she'd risked her life to free him, she ceased being merely his pupil and became something more. He wished there were not such an obscene difference in their ages, for he loved her-her daring and spirit even more than her faith in him.

In the morning, Jorani sought out Baron Peto, meeting with him in his private chambers. Peto's suspicions had turned away from Jorani, and his guards had been questioning the kitchen staff, dismissing the servants employed since the rebellion.

"Mihael and I have decided that from now on, he will be the one to taste my food. Since I've grown rather fond of him, I'd prefer to have Obour servants prepare it," Peto said to him. "I also request that you stay in the castle. You seem to be the only one capable of treating the poisonings."

"I'll be glad to remain," Jorani replied.

"There is one restriction on you. I will not arm my enemies. I therefore order you not to share your knowledge with Baroness Ilsabet."

So Peto guessed she might have poisoned herself. Well, Jorani thought, only a fool would not. He agreed, then made a request of his own. "It seems to me that the constant reminders of her father along with your presence are detrimental to the Baroness Ilsabet's health. My estate is close by. She could stay there for a time. My servants know her well, and she would be quite safe. If you're concerned about her safety, there is a guardhouse for your own men."

As Jorani anticipated, Peto understood his reasoning immediately. Til order it," he said.

"Thank you, Baron."

Jorani was about to add a final remark when they were interrupted by one of the castle guards. "Baron, I've been sent to tell you that the Baroness Marishka and a servant have left the castle."

"How did the girl get by you?" Peto demanded.

"She was dressed like the servant, Sire. I wouldn't even know now but one of her maids discovered her missing. She left a letter for you."

Peto unsealed it, frowning as he read the contents. "Who is Sagesse?" he asked Jorani.

Marishka's personal maid, Kashi, came from a family of fisher folk that lived on the opposite bank of the Arvid river, a few miles upstream from Nimbus Castle. With one of Kashi's hooded capes covering her distinctive copper-colored hair, Marishka crossed the river with her, then followed the foot trail upstream. At the village, she paid for a pair of horses and supplies for Kashi and herself. Once

outfitted, they followed the river northwest, heading for the high grasslands of Kislova's central plain, and the mountains beyond it.

Marishka had never been so far from the castle, and never traveled outside the castle alone, but pilgrims to Sagesse, no matter how wealthy, were required to travel there as common folk. As to the traveling customs of common folk, Marishka had to take Kashi's advice that no matter how poor, a woman would not travel through Kislova alone. Besides, Kashi would never have helped Marishka leave the castle unless she were allowed to come along.

As they rode, the sun warmed them, and the misty skies of the lowlands cleared. That night, Marishka lay back and, for the first time in her life, beheld the full splendor of the stars. The universe was so vast, and she so tiny. She threw a branch on the fire, lay down, and tried to sleep, but it eluded her. Finally, bowing to the inevitable, she wrapped a blanket around her shoulders and moved closer to the warmth of the flames.

As she sat there, she began to understand Sagesse's wisdom. Without friends and servants, without a tent to shelter her, she would realize her small part in the universe, contemplate fate, and be ready for the Seer's advice.

Through the wind, she heard the distant howl of wolves grow closer. The horses whinnied in fear With one hand on the hilt of the knife she carried, Marishka reached out to wake Kashi. As she did, the sounds stopped. Marishka froze and listened, her eyes straining to distinguish reality from shadows and from phantasms born of her fear. The grasses on the edge of their sandy clearing rustled, a discordant noise amid the steady whisper of the wind.

"Who's there?" Marishka called.

Eyes glowed in the firelight and a white wolf stepped into the dancing glow.

Marishka pulled a burning branch from the fire. With it in one hand and her knife in the other, she pulled off her cape and moved between the animal and their horses. She took the wide-legged stance she'd seen her brother use in his training. "Go!" she ordered, and though she was terrified, she advanced on it. "Shoo! Go away!"

It stood its ground, head cocked, seeming to appraise her with a calm intelligence and a feral longing that made her heart beat even harder.

She glanced down for a moment and kicked at Kashi. When she looked back, the wolf was gone, and in its place, crouched low against the sand, was a naked young man no older than her brother. His hair was white, his skin tinged silver in the moonlight, and his colorless eyes were the eyes of the wolf. He might have been solid and alive, yet there was something strange in his form, as if his image had been

painted in the air. She looked down at the ground. His body threw no shadow.

Until now she had never believed in werebeasts, let alone the ghosts of them. She'd paid little attention to the legends concerning them but knew that black ones foreshadowed plague and disasters. The silver were the harbingers of sudden, violent death, and in wolf form were the guardians of the ghosts of the victims.

"Go!" Marishka exclaimed again, certain the creature could see her terror, hear it, smell it.

"Why?" he asked, the sound soft, almost one with the breeze.

"I am on pilgrimage to the Seer. Will you honor this?"

A terrible look of regret fell across the youth's face. "I must, at least for now, though you'll be mine soon enough. I smell the reek of death on you already," he replied and turned away from her. His form stretched and flowed from man to wolf, then vanished into the shadows, the night.

Marishka sank beside the fire and shuddered with fear and doubt. What was she doing here? Did she honestly think the advice of the Seer would alter anyone's plans for her future?

The thought was so troubling that she did not sleep at all that night, or the next. By the time she and Kashi reached the footpath leading up the mountain to Sagesse's cave, Marishka wondered where she'd find the strength to make the climb. Though Kashi's steady arms would have been welcome, Marishka had to go alone. No one was allowed to hear the Seer's advice but the petitioner. She looked up at the winding path, the cave itself shrouded in dense clouds. After so many days of riding, her journey was almost over. She sighed with weariness and began the climb.

It seemed that her strength increased with each step. Perhaps hope caused this; perhaps magic. No matter, Marishka's spirits lifted. The climb would be easy, and then she could go home.

Then she stepped into the clouds. Engulfed in a glowing mass of white, she lost sight of the trail before or behind, lost all sense of the future or even the present. Only the past was real and all around her. Inexplicable before, it stood out now with new clarity.

She saw her mother die, her beautiful face twisted with agony at the end. She saw her father's grief change him from a man who looked after his subjects into a tyrant, hated by all save those close to him. She saw Peto's resignation as he raised his sword, his remorse as he looked down at her crying over her father's body, the kindness he had shown to even her sister.

No, she could not hate him; nor could she listen to Ilsabet's warnings, fueled as they were by her terrible need for vengeance.

"Peto," she whispered and fell to her knees. In spite of her heavy

boots and leggings, the stones in the path cut into her, the physical pain as painful as the choices she had to make.

But the first and the most important had already been made. She'd come here, and the Seer was near.

Afraid to stand, she crawled upward, out of the mist. Though the mountainside fell off to her left, the path was widening and the cave opening was just above her. With her cloak pressed tightly to her body by the unceasing wind, she finished the climb.

There was no sign of life outside the cave. She stepped into its mouth and let her eyes become accustomed to the darkness. When she did, she saw a flickering light coming from farther in.

"Sagesse?" she called. "I have come to ask your advice."

No response. Marishka went on as the light grew brighter, seeing finally the source, a huge cavern just ahead. At the edge of it stood a great polished slab of granite, on which sat empty cups and plates, a sharp knife with a roughly carved hilt, and an unbleached woolen blanket.

She had brought gold for an offering. She laid it there, but it looked silly beside the more practical things that someone living alone might need. She unfastened the gilded clasp of her thick blue cloak and laid it beside the other offerings.

"Come forward to the pool," a voice called.

Marishka walked forward, but it was only when she stood on the very edge of the milky water that she saw an old woman sitting on a rock just to her left.

Her hair was white, long and soft, hanging in thin wavy strands over her shoulders. Her gown was also white. Her skin was just as pale, parchment-thin with age but unblemished. Marishka wondered if she ever sat outside in the sun or if this cave-the source of her power, it was rumored-was also her prison.

"Marishka Obour, you would see your future?" Seeing her shock, Sagesse laughed, not the cackle of some old crone, but the beautiful voice of a woman who has known decades of wisdom. "I know your name because I shared your vision. Even without it, I might have known you. Visitors have spoken often of the beauty of your face and hair. Come, sit beside me, and we will seek your fate together."

Marishka did as the woman asked, and stared into the milky waters of the pool. Afternoon turned to evening. The light that shone on them from some hidden place far above changed from white to pink to mauve and slowly faded. Sagesse lit torches, and they stared into the pool, waiting for some great revelation.

"There is nothing," Sagesse finally declared.

Marishka shuddered. "What does it mean?" she asked.

"I believe that your future was decided in the moment your father

died. No matter what your course, you cannot change it." She took Marishka's hand, holding it as she added, "It may mean something else as well-you will not live a long life. But at least you may do as you like and take comfort from the happiness you find in what is left of it. Now go, your companion is growing anxious."

Marishka turned to leave. At the edge of the cavern, she turned back and saw that Sagesse had vanished as mysteriously as she had appeared.

As Marishka walked down the path, she saw extra horses tethered beside their camp, and the dark forms of men against the flames. If there had been another way down, Marishka might have considered fleeing, but with no choice but to face them, she put her hand on the hilt of her knife and went more quickly on.

As she moved closer, she saw the black-and-gold livery of Sundell and Baron Peto waiting for her.

"They told me I must not follow you to the cave," he said, then held out his hand as if uncertain she would take it. When she did, he moved closer to her, pulled the cloak off his shoulders, and wrapped her in it. It smelled of smoke from the fire and of sweat from his long ride. "Can you share what you learned?" he asked.

She shook her head. "The Seer said that I should follow my heart."

She tilted her head up for him to kiss her. As he did, she felt such a terrible presentiment of doom that she wondered if Sagesse had lied, then shuddered at the sacrilege of even the thought.

"Is it possible for me to go up?" Peto asked.

"I'm sorry, but you must come here seeking her, and travel as any common man would."

He seemed to consider. "She has already answered the question I would have asked. Now we must talk."

He led Marishka into his tent and had a servant bring her food and wine. Until it was set in front of her, she hadn't realized how hungry she'd become in her hours on the mountain. She ate feverishly while Peto sat, content to watch her and say nothing.

When she'd finished, he took her hand again. "When you turned up missing, I realized how much I cared for you. I've asked your brother for permission to wed you," he said. "He has pledged you to me. He said that arranged marriages are your custom. They aren't mine. So I ask you, will we wed?"

Yesterday, she would not have known how to answer. She did now. "Of course," she said. "At summer solstice. The priests will have no choice but to see the union as a hopeful sign."

TEN

Jorani's house, called Argentine because of its white stone facade, was far smaller than Nimbus Castle, but far more beautiful. As the elixirs Jorani had sent with Ilsabet slowly brought her old strength back and added to it, she roamed the estate gardens where early spring flowers poked their heads through the frost-covered soil. At her request, the marble fountain was turned on during the day. As she stared into its swirling water, she contemplated revenge. At night before she went to bed, she would unwrap her father's clothes. The first time she did so, she shuddered, recalling the terrible vision she'd had before. But there was no repeat of it. The blood on the cloth had all dried, and it would flake off in her hands and dust the thin white cotton of her nightdress.

As the days grew longer, her isolation grated on her. "Is there a library here?" she asked her maid.

"In Lord Jorani's private chambers."

"Take me to it," Ilsabet ordered. When the girl hesitated, Ilsabet added, "I was told to treat this estate as my home. Am I not allowed in every room of it?"

"Of course, Baroness. Come this way."

Ilsabet followed her to a small room, well-lit and warmed by the sun streaming through the windows. The books were not at all the sort to further her education.

As she idly occupied her time with a book of statesmanship, her knee bumped the bottom of the table, and she felt the board move. She knelt and looked up at it, discovering a hidden drawer. Inside it she found a written journal. There, in Jorani's precise hand was a guide to the cultivated plants in the garden, and to the wild ones that grew in the woods around the estate. Some of these were starred, devil's cup among them, she noted with interest. In the back of the book, she found a listing of the starred plants, each followed by a series of letters that she soon understood meant the part of the plant to be used as a drug.

Her body shook with excitement. This was why Jorani had sent her here. Here she could learn without any need for more than the most rudimentary caution.

"Thank you, Jorani," she whispered as she noted the place on the shelves where books on botany were kept.

Soon the sight of the little baroness in knee boots and leggings became familiar to the servants. Ilsabet found the land a marvelous source of poisons and cures. Devil's cup grew in the marshy soil of the forest, along with castor trees, monkshood, poisonous yew, and an

assortment of deadly berries much prized for their more mundane use as a bright red dye. Rilca, the cook, would sometimes see her digging in the garden or in the woods beyond it and think with some amusement what an odd hobby it was for a girl of noble birth. Nonetheless, she found herself pleased to be questioned in such depth about every herb and spice on her shelves.

"Why do you keep this dried black nettle in the back of the cupboard?" Ilsabet asked one day.

Rilca, absorbed in thickening a stew, glanced down at the jar. "I wouldn't want anyone to mistake it for a cooking herb."

"What happens if you brew a tea from it?"

"A tea?" Rilca put down her spoon and stared at the girl. "When I was young, I was told to never eat black nettle."

"But why?"

"I asked a healer the same question. He said the power of the nettle is in its sting. You've seen the effect of its poultices often enough, I suppose, since your father was a fighter. The wound reddens and blisters, then begins to seep as the poultice draws out the poisons. But if you drink it, a difficult matter if black nettle tastes half as bad as it smells, your stomach is burned on the inside in much the way your throat was from devil's cup poison. Eating becomes painful, and the food does not nourish. If you drink enough of the tea, you will die in great agony the way a fighter might from a stomach wound."

"Is there an antidote?" Ilsabet asked.

"I don't know. I've only heard how poisonous the plant is from just one person, never anywhere else, so the man may have been wrong. But to be on the safe side, I keep it in the cupboard rather than on the shelf with the other herbs, where someone might use it to season a dish by mistake."

Ilsabet had learned enough. She changed the subject. "What about marjoram? Is it true that the plant causes unhappy marriages?" she asked.

"I don't know, but I wouldn't test it at a wedding feast. There's others you might want to know of." Rilca damped the fire and went to the cupboard, pulling out a number of jars of dried herbs and oils. She opened a jar of amber-colored leaves and handed it to Ilsabet. The smell was sweet, almost like the incense that her father used to import from the east to burn in the hearths during the annual winter feast.

"It is called the constant plant, and its tea has been drunk each night by many a faithless wife to assure that no child will come from a love affair," Rilca explained.

Ilsabet laughed. "Do I look as if I need it?" she asked.

"It has another use as well. Drunk every night, it prevents children. But if a woman stops using it, she will conceive within a

week. Many women use it to time their pregnancy. With your breathing problems, it would be better to deliver a child in late autumn before your winter cough sets in. If you marry a warrior who sleeps in his castle one night out of ten, it will assure you a family."

"I'd rather the warrior stayed at home," Ilsabet said. "Do you have an herb for that?"

Rilca laughed and lifted three more jars from her collection. "Mix these together and put them in a small jar filled with flax oil. The scent is said to be an aphrodisiac."

"Rilca!" Ilsabet laughed. "Does it work?"

"I've had four husbands," the old woman confessed.

It occurred to Ilsabet that a simple question had yielded so many marvelous responses. "Can I go with you when you gather herbs?" she asked.

Rilca banked the fire under her pot and pulled the sweetbread from the oven, slicing off a piece for Ilsabet. "Of course you can. I'd be pleased to share what I know. Would you like a cup of tea?" she asked.

"Not now, but I will take a pot of water upstairs and heat it on my fire. I'll brew my own and lie down after I drink it. Jorani says I must rest."

"A good idea." Rilca said. "You look so much better, though."

"I feel better," she replied. "It's all the marvelous care." She slipped the bread into her pocket and carried the pot upstairs.

When the water was boiling, she fixed a cup of tea.

As it was steeping, she poured a bit of water into a little earthen bowl she had found in Jorani's chambers, pulled the jar of nettle leaves from her pocket, dropped a handful into the water, and set both on the coals. By the time she'd finished her second cup of tea, the nettle water had darkened and evaporated by half, leaving a tarry liquid in the bottom of the bowl.

Ilsabet sniffed it. If it tasted half as disgusting as it smelled, she could well understand why no one would accidently swallow it. Nonetheless, she had to know its effect. She dipped the corner of a piece of cloth in the liquid and folded it onto itself, being careful not to touch it. With it in the pocket of her cloak, she pulled on a pair of thick leather gloves and went outside.

The sky had darkened. It would rain soon. She hadn't much time. Rounding the corner of the stable, she spied the lame brown fox that Rilca had taken pity on years ago. Now it was nearly tame and begged with as much persistence as a pampered house cat. It also left its scent on the garden plants. Rilca would hardly miss it. Ilsabet crouched down and held out a piece of the fresh bread. "Come," she called. "Come and take it."

The fox moved close, and as it bit into the piece, Ilsabet grabbed

it. Struggling to get loose, it bit through her glove, nearly to the bone. Nonetheless, Ilsabet held on until she smeared a bit of the black nettle infusion onto the bottom of the animal's paw, then let it go.

The fox limped off with as much dignity as it could muster to the sunny side of the stable and stretched out on the ground. She followed at a distance and waited. When the nettle began to pain the animal, it began licking the tarry residue from its paw until, satisfied, it rolled over and went to sleep.

Ilsabet had experienced a number of nettle poul-tices in her life. She knew the drawing quality took time to appear, so she crouched some distance away from the animal and waited.

It paid little attention to her as it dozed off. She began to think that she hadn't given it enough, but then the fox rolled onto its stomach and gagged as if trying to spit up a bad piece of meat. It looked up at her as though it knew she was the source of its pain, and disappeared into the thick brush of the untended field.

Now she would never know the outcome! Furious, she tried to follow the fox, but the brambles stuck to the hem of her cloak, and the animal's coloring blended too perfectly with the golden shoots of meadow grass. Stamping her foot in frustration, Ilsa-bet returned to the house, stealing in a side door and back to her room.

The next day, she went down to the kitchen just as Rilca went outside to pick herbs to season the evening meal. Ilsabet followed her. "Would you like me to rinse the greens for you?" she asked.

"No. It rained this morning. I kept an eye out for that cursed fox, but it seems to have run off." She stood up and rubbed her knees. "I wonder if I'd miss the pains of growing old if they disappeared."

"I wouldn't," Ilsabet said.

"Well, Baroness, you know quite a lot about pain for such a tiny thing, so I suppose you can talk."

Talk, Ilsabet thought, and considered that Rilca knew far too much about black nettles. She followed Rilca inside and watched the woman open a bottle of dark brown tonic-a mixture of honey and water and the concentrated essences of bedstraw and feverfew, along with an ample amount of alcohol, Ilsabet assumed. The woman wrinkled her nose at the taste. "It's a curse to have to drink something as bitter as this," she said with mock exasperation.

"Lord Jorani tells me that people tolerate anything that works," Ilsabet replied. Midway through the comment, she had a marvelous revelation and could not help but smile. "Since I'm getting hungry and you're making goulash, I'll leave you to your work," she said, then went upstairs.

The next day, Rilca's tonic tasted more bitter than usual. She washed it down with a cup of bee balm and tansy tea and followed the

evening dose of tonic with tea as well. In spite of the stomach-soothing herbs, she woke in the middle of the night with terrible pains deep inside her, as if someone had poked needles into her stomach and was pushing them deeper inside her.

"The tonic's gone bad," she thought, and sipped the remnants of cold tea in the pot by her bedside. It alleviated the agony somewhat but in the morning Rilca did not have the strength to make breakfast. The other servants waited on her with the same care they would have given their lord; perhaps even better since Lord Jorani was not the one who fixed their meals.

For a week she stopped eating, drinking only the soothing tea when her thirst became unbearable. Gradually, the pain subsided, and she went back to her duties, bearing the stiffness in her joints without tonics.

Rilca never once suspected Ilsabet, for the little baroness sat often at her bedside, reading aloud to her or simply holding her hand, an expression of such intensity on her face that it seemed to Rilca that Ilsabet was trying to take on the agony for her through an act of will.

It also appeared that the child's own health was improving. Though she still had a trace of her cough and had gained no color to her complexion, there was a glow about her that had not been present before, making her pallor seem exotic rather than sickly.

A few days after Rilca was able to resume her duties in the kitchen, Ilsabet received a letter from her sister.

"Peto tells me you are quite recovered," Marishka wrote. "I've told him I will not plan my wedding unless you are here with me. I'm frantic without you. Come soon, Ilsabet. I miss you."

"So will I," Rilca said when Ilsabet told her the news. "I've never had a more pleasant guest, nor one who cared about my well-being as much as you do," she said.

When Ilsabet left for home, Rilca even cried.

When she heard the sentries announce Ilsabet's arrival, Marishka ran through the front door, then shivered in the damp of the courtyard. Ilsabet stepped down from the coach, and Marishka paused. It seemed Ilsabet had changed. She seemed to have matured, becoming self-assured, determined. Uncertain of Ilsabet's mood, Marishka held back until her sister held out her arms. Then she ran into them.

"Come inside," she said. "The damp isn't good for you."

They went upstairs to Marishka's chambers and sat sipping tea by the fire. The number of Marishka's dresses had grown, the old ones moved to the back of their hooks. The dress Marishka wore tonight was also new, but in the same shade of blue as the Obour banner.

It heartened Ilsabet to think of her sister requesting a dress in that color, but she was angry that Peto had allowed it. She could picture her sister wearing it, the far too obedient subject in the colors of her defeated family.

The spring fogs on the river had been thicker than in usual years, and Marishka missed the rides through the sunny meadows. She confessed this to Ilsabet then added her real fear, "I'm doing nothing but worry. I think I'm getting fat, and my face looks terrible. What kind of a bride will I make?"

A perfect one, Ilsabet thought, so beautiful in her wedding splendor that even the rebels would be forced to concede that any of them would have loved her in Peto's place. She wondered if Peto had considered this-and if it were a major part of his choosing Marishka in the first place. She sat beside her sister, taking both her hands. "You must demand what you want, Marishka. Tell Peto that he must make arrangements to protect you."

"I don't want to give him cause to worry. I love him so much!" She saw Ilsabet's frown and hurried on. "I've tried not to care for him, I truly have, but I can't help myself."

"Of course, I understand. But, Marishka, you might be wed to him for half a century. If you let him order you around now, what will your life be like when his first rush of love wears off?" She had worded this last carefully, not surprised by Marishka's reply.

"It isn't like that. He's protecting me because he loves me. I don't think he can help himself either. When you see us together, you'll know."

Ilsabet did not have to wait long for that event. The three of them dined alone that night. Sadly, Marishka had been correct. Everything about the way Peto looked at her, attentive to her every need, made Ilsabet certain he cared deeply about Marishka.

So be it, she thought. Her sister had been warned. Without a pang of conscience, she leaned forward and said to Peto in a conspiratorial tone, "Marishka has a request to make."

"Request?" Peto put down his glass and looked at his fiancee. "What is it?"

"I need… that is, I want to see the sun, Peto. I

want to go riding as I did before."

"At Argentine, I rode every day," Ilsabet said. "My health has never been better. It's this cursed fog that ruined it."

Peto looked from Ilsabet to his fiancee. He'd recently negotiated another truce in a seemingly endless series of truces and hoped it would survive until his wedding day. The sight of Marishka riding through the countryside would hardly pacify anyone. "We're going to visit Sundell after the wedding, dearest. Can you wait?"

"The wedding isn't for another five weeks," Ilsabet reminded him.

"I suppose that if you stayed to little-used paths and varied your route each day…" he began.

"Thank you!" Marishka cried and kissed him. Ilsabet looked away, certain that sight would be more than she could bear.

The next day Marishka and Ilsabet galloped in the highlands above the river. Ten guards accompanied them, and had Ilsabet not demanded that she and her sister lead, they would have been choked by the dust.

On their next afternoon's ride, they crossed the river and took back paths into the mountains, and the day after was a different route yet again. Ilsabet turned toward her sister, smiled happily, and pointed to a pair of deer grazing in the field below their path. "Let's spread our lunch here," she said.

They dined and shared a small bottle of wine. The drink and the heat of the day made Marishka warm. When they returned that evening, they changed into loose robes and stole down a private stairway that opened onto a sheltered ledge beside the river. With Greta and Kashi watching over them, they bathed in the Arvid River. "The water is already getting warmer," Marishka commented.

No doubt she was thinking how soon her wedding would be. The idyllic times were ending, Ilsabet thought, amazed at how little sorrow she felt.

Hours after she was supposed to have retired, Ilsabet moved through the labyrinth of tunnels in Nimbus Castle until she reached Jorani's hidden room. He wasn't there; she'd doubted he would be. What she planned was dangerous, and she wanted him entirely ignorant of what she intended to do. She lit a single candle and examined his stores with new knowledge, deciding finally on something he had revealed to her months before. With what she needed wrapped in a kerchief inside a pocket, she turned to go, then heard his steps in the room above.

The scent of her candle would linger in the room. He'd know someone had been here. Better to face him now.

When he saw her sitting at the table reading one of his books, he climbed down and locked the door behind him. "I hardly expected a visit from you at this hour," he commented as he took a seat across from her.

She closed the book. "I thought it best that we not meet publicly. I'd hoped to find you here tonight."

"Publicly?"

"Should anything else mysterious or tragic happen in Nimbus Castle, I wouldn't want suspicion to fall on you."

"What would possibly happen?" he asked carefully.

She decided on a cautious answer. "Any number of things, especially with poor Marishka nervous enough to have fainting fits. I've been reading about the calming plants like poppy and foxglove and thinking that perhaps I should ask the cook to fix Marishka tea each night to help her sleep. I suspect she'll need an extra strong brew the morning of the wedding."

"Are you resigned to letting the wedding take place?"

Ilsabet laughed. "You act as if I have a choice, Jorani."

He didn't answer directly. Instead he said, "In the months you've been gone, the rebels have attacked us twice. Each time, they've been repulsed with a minimum of losses for our side and theirs. Each time, Baron Peto has sent messages of peace. I think they're finally willing to let the hatred die and allow him to marry whomever he wishes. He's a wise man, child; far wiser than I'd expected."

"And their child will be half Obour," she commented.

"Exactly."

So Jorani had also been won over. She could forgive him the betrayal far more than that of her family, for like her father, he had the affairs of their domain to consider.

"I am resigned," she said in answer to his earlier question. She stood and walked around the table, taking his hands. "I'll not protest the wedding, but once it's over I would like to return to Argentine. I could learn to manage your lands since it seems that Peto will not let you out of his sight to go home."

For the first time he showed some emotion, responding with a bitter smile, and she knew she'd spoken no less than the truth.

When she'd gone, Jorani sat at the table looking at the book she had been reading, thinking how quickly she had closed it when he'd come in. She wouldn't dare try to harm the baron; she'd be suspected, imprisoned, hanged. Nonetheless, he examined the bottles on his shelves, noting the dust that had formed on them in his long absence from the room. The spider, which he risked the discovery of this room in order to feed, was still in its bowl, the web untouched. The sand that housed his ants was smooth, their tunnels undisturbed. But as he held the bowl close to the light, he saw a bit of lampblack on the side of their container. He wiped it off, thinking it was natural for Ilsabet to hold up a lamp to get a good look at them.

She's really just a child, he thought. All children are curious.

Nothing more.

The last was less a thought than a plea to the fates; a prayer.

ELEVEN

When Marishka and Ilsabet went riding, Peto accomplished nothing until they returned. He tried to work, but the papers he read, the decisions he made, were all colored by the thought that his love might be waylaid by rebels, killed, raped… The horrors of his imagination were endless.

As a result, when two of the guards came riding back to the castle with news of an accident, Peto was the first one down the stairs to the courtyard. When he heard that Marishka had been the victim, he did not ask for details, but ordered the guard off his mount.

"Send for the troop surgeon," he ordered, "and a healer. Don't delay."

Peto rode out in the company of the second guard. When he reached the high flat meadows, he tried to relax. The rolling grasslands were hardly the place for a fatal accident, he decided. Probably everyone was being overly cautious, as they should be.

Then he saw Marishka lying so white and still among the yellow wildflowers, and sorrow filled him. "Is she dead?" he asked Ilsabet.

Ilsabet shook her head.

"Their horses bolted after stepping on a snake," one of the guards said. "Ilsabet managed to control hers; Marishka was not so lucky."

"Where is the horse?" Peto asked. He was a sol-dier, used to venting strong emotion with blood. He'd feel infinitely better if he could kill the beast.

"Dead, Baron. It ran off the side of the cliff road."

"Marishka jumped deliberately, or she would have gone over with the mare," Ilsabet said.

It was the last word either of them spoke. They sat on either side of the unconscious girl waiting for help.

Peto's campaign surgeon was a seasoned soldier. He arrived a quarter hour after Peto and examined the unconscious girl carefully, beginning with her limbs. "Her leg is broken," he said. "And the bump on her head worries me."

"Will she be all right?" Peto asked.

"I think there may also be some damage to her back. We'll have to wait until she's awake to determine the extent. In the meantime, I should set her leg while she's unconscious and save her some pain."

Peto watched the surgeon cut away Marishka's leather boots, then left the man to his work. It would not be correct for Peto to see his future bride so exposed. And Ilsabet was with her to comfort her if she woke.

Marishka had often spoken to him about the Seer's message-that

nothing Marishka did would alter her fate. He hadn't understood then; he began to understand now. He'd been so worried about the rebels killing or kidnapping her, but in the end she had been harmed anyway by something as insignificant as a meadow snake. Marishka would undoubtedly tell him it could as easily have been a piece of bad meat or a fall down the always slippery castle stairs.

"No!" he whispered to whatever gods ruled this land. "You will not have her."

When Marishka finally woke, the air had cooled with evening. She lay in the same place where she had fallen, but now there were blankets beneath her and a tent erected around the spot to shade her from the setting sun. She looked from Peto to Dow, the old healer, then at the surgeon. "So much effort for me," she said.

"Whatever is needed," Peto replied.

The surgeon examined her first. Though her head hurt terribly and her stomach seemed queasy, she could move her limbs. But when she tried to sit up, she cried out in pain and pressed her palms to her head. Dow moved to her side, a bottle in his hand.

"Drink this," he said. "The mix is old, but your sister is out gathering the herbs for a more potent tea. We'll take the headache away soon enough.

"She has knowledge of what is needed?" Peto asked.

"A good deal, most of it self-taught. I think with proper training she could become a great healer."

"Nonetheless, check the herbs she brings. I wouldn't want a mistake to weigh on her conscience or yours."

"Certainly, Baron."

When Ilsabet returned she seemed out of breath and her hair had fallen loose from its clip, moving in the faint breeze like the silver grass just beginning to bloom in the meadow. She handed Dow her cache and sat, obviously waiting for praise.

He would have given it anyway. Into the already boiling water he threw mugwort, valerian, wound-wort, and the potent wild onions that were just beginning to poke through the warm soil. He added a large quantity of honey to the mix, for the herbs would be too bitter to drink without it. Though Ilsabet had not been asked for them, she separately brought potent black nettle leaves, mullein, and yarrow. "The cook at Argentine says these make an ideal poultice for bruises. I thought you might try it on her head and back."

"Perfect, child, though I don't think her back needs any treatment."

"She woke?" Ilsabet asked.

"Then dozed off again. Wake her, if you wish. She asked that you

do so."

Ilsabet turned to her sister and took her hand, calling her name, embracing her carefully when she opened her eyes. They propped up Marishka's head and shoulders so she could drink the tea while Dow applied the fresh poultice to the bruise on her forehead.

They stayed in the field that night. While the others slept, Marishka had strange dreams of Sagesse and her prediction, of being cold, alone. She stood outside a tomb in a land she did not recognize. Her body had lost its color, her hair and skin had become the silver of the moonlight. She heard a howl in the distance, but it brought no fear. Instead, she fell forward and, without knowing how, bounded in the direction of the cry.

She forced herself awake. Her head pounded. Not wanting to wake anyone, she reached for the teapot. Though the steeped herbs had become bitter, she drank the brew eagerly and slept.

In the morning, the guards placed her on a pallet and carried her down the steep road. Later, safely ensconced in her room with a pot of tea on the table beside her and her head wound washed and wrapped, she dined with Ilsabet, Mihael, and Peto, eating sparingly.

Peto was surprised at the change in Marishka's sister. Ilsabet seemed pleased to help plan the wedding, offering suggestions on how to decorate the great hall for the banquet. Peto wanted to request that she swear allegiance to him at the wedding, but recalling her defiant pose some months earlier, decided not to remind her of it. If she was content to forget the past, he would do the same.

When Marishka began looking tired, Ilsabet poured her a cup of tea. Peto said goodnight, but ilsabet stayed, holding her sister's hand until Marishka slept. Later, when Marishka woke with her head pounding, her servant came in, heated the pot, and poured a cup of tea. The brew seemed somewhat more bitter than it had been earlier, but it relieved Marishka's pain. Sleep came easily.

In the morning, Marishka and Peto ate together. Though Marishka felt famished, the first bite of her meat and apple tart made her gag, and she settled for a bit of fruit and some unleavened bread and more tea brought up personally by the healer.

"She seems so pale," Peto commented to Dow.

"She's lucky to be alive. Give her time to recover," the healer replied with a chuckle. "She'll dance at the wedding, believe me."

Marishka lay back and smiled bravely, though thoughts of last night's dream, the tomb, and the wolf refused to dissipate even with the soft sunlight falling through her open window.

"Let me sit there, Peto," she said pointing to a chair beside the window. When the healer said it was all right for her to move, he carried her there, propping up her broken leg, moving a table and

second chair close by. They played cards until afternoon when Ilsabet took his place.

"Did you sleep well?" Ilsabet asked.

Marishka nodded, then tears came to her eyes. She dabbed at them and told her sister about the pain and terrible dream, and about Sagesse's predictions. "I'm probably just silly but I feel my life slipping away." She gripped her sister's hands. "Ilsabet, I'm so afraid. I don't want to die!"

Ilsabet held on to her tightly. "Then don't," she said. "Fight whatever happens, make your own fate."

"That's easy for you to say…"

"Don't talk about what I do. You do it!" Marishka cried openly. "The Seer said I would not have a long life."

"You never told me that."

"I never told anyone." Marishka calmed herself enough to describe everything she'd seen in the Seer's cave, and everything the Seer had said to her. "So you see, my fate is decided," Marishka concluded and began to cry again.

A servant heard the sobbing and came into the room, stopping when she saw Ilsabet at her sister's side, holding her tightly, stroking her hair. It occurred to the woman that Ilsabet had never looked so beautiful. There was no reason for the change-no special hair arrangement or color in her gown. A trick of the light, the woman thought as Ilsabet motioned her to go.

Even after her success with the rats, Ilsabet hadn't considered that she had any real power. The poisons from Jorani's collection had provided the means, and it had been Jorani's education that had shown her the way.

But once she had been on her own at Argentine, surrounded by a wealth of different herbs with a multitude of uses, once she had begun to read and study, her ability-her power! — became clear. Even then she had not been certain of it until the fox disappeared and she knew beyond a doubt that she had the ability to kill.

Her experiments with the nettle poison had been rash, but they'd taught her much. In large quantities, the poison killed immediately; in smaller doses, it took time.

There would be more risk in repeated doses, but small doses would make it seem as if the victim had sickened and died, a more natural end than a healthy person suddenly keeling over. Sunstrokes were rare in this cloudy kingdom, and little else would kill so quickly.

So she had waited for exactly the right moment to arrange Marishka's accident. Now that it was over and the girl was confined to bed, she'd stay at Marishka's side, the perfect loving sister with plenty

of opportunities to see that Marishka and Peto would never wed.

"She should never have sworn loyalty to him," she said aloud as she sat alone in her chamber, brushing her pale blond hair. She'd spent the entire day with Marishka. Now that their lives were not filled with the demands of their father or the constant nervous presence of Lady Lorena, they had a chance to know one another. Though Ilsabet still thought Marishka over-emotional and easily flattered, she had to admit Marishka admired her a great deal, and admiration itself made Ilsabet warm to her.

"If only she hadn't made Peto love her," she added, also aloud.

Marishka's death would be slow and painful, and Ilsabet would be at her side through it all, comforting her, crying with her. No, she'd never be suspected of any crime. If she considered the matter, she would have been astonished that she felt no pangs of conscience, but only a growing excitement more internal and intense than any she had ever felt before.

She did not consider it.

Instead, she thought of how devastated Peto would be as he watched the one he loved die. There would be no wedding, no rejoicing, no child to unite their kingdoms.

She smiled at the thought; she could not help but smile. As she did, she saw her reflection in her mirror blur and fade into a pale, swirling cloud. In the center of it, she saw an old woman's face.

"I know who you are," Ilsabet whispered. "Your threats don't frighten me. Go back to your cave where you belong."

She picked up her brush and began to run it through her hair, staring at the mirror as if Sagesse were not staring out of it, her eyes condemning Ilsabet for what she planned, her soft whisper trying to turn Ilsabet from the path she had chosen.

"Your power is not this great," Ilsabet whispered, and some moments later was rewarded with the sight of her own face once more clear in the glass.

She didn't look like a murderer. Her eyes seemed to have darkened to a more vivid shade of blue. Her hair, though still thin, had lightened and taken on the lustre of silk threads.

It's just the sun and all the excitement, she thought, then dismissed the matter before she might glimpse the truth.

TWELVE

Though Marishka's condition improved for a time, the attacks of stomach pain gradually increased. They made her unable to eat, or to sleep save with the aid of strong potions. The healer added fumes to her treatment, and her room was often filled with smoke of sage and other herbs he laid on the hot stones of her hearth.

Fever blisters covered her lips. She could not eat or drink, taking only a little water when Ilsabet or Peto spooned it into her mouth. And she would have dreams, terrible ones of her father and mother coming back from the dead to claim her, or of leaping onto the pyre after Lady Lorena and being consumed by the flames. But the worst were the glorious ones when she dreamt herself dead, free of all the pain, running through the moonlit night with the silver wolf at her side.

"Don't let the fire claim my body," she said to Peto one morning a few weeks after her accident. "It's claiming it now, I will not have it taken twice."

"Don't talk about death," Peto replied, his voice breaking with grief.

"I must. In your land the dead are entombed, yes?"

He nodded.

"Do the same with me. Put the Obour and Casse crests on the door. Someday, Peto, you will be buried beside me, joined in death as we never were in life."

"We will be joined now if you will allow it," he replied.

For the first time in days, he saw Marishka smile.

Though the marriage would be hastily performed, Marishka asked for the traditional wedding feast. While soldiers took word of the event to nobles of the surrounding estates and the cooks began preparing the meal, Marishka rested.

The great hall had been cleaned, and its three long tables covered with brocade cloths. On them were goldleaf dishes, silver knives and forks and crystal goblets, all speaking of the wealth of Sundell. Cream and pink roses were scattered across the bridal table, and the corner where the ceremony was to take place was filled with flowers and lace and the soft flicker of candlelight.

Because only a handful of nobles were able to attend on such short notice, and because Peto rightly understood that this would likely be Mar-ishka's last appearance before her funeral, he invited some of the wealthy merchants families of Pirie as well as the castle servants who knew Marishka well. Conspicuously absent were any representatives of the rebellion. Peto would not insult the Obours and

his noble guests by serving their former enemies in their fallen leader's home.

Peto stood beside the priest. Shaul, who would witness the vows on behalf of Sundell, stood to one side. The music grew louder as Marishka was carried to the altar.

She had chosen to wed in the blue-and-gold gown that had been her mother's wedding dress. Her still beautiful hair hung in ringlets over her shoulders, and a crown of white rosebuds covered the top and were braided through the delicate lace of the bridal veil. Makeup hid the sores on her face, and rouge its pallor. Though her eyes were dulled by pain and her cheeks sunken, she was lovely.

But the most surprising change was not in Mar-ishka, whose illness was well known, but in her sister. At Marishka's insistence, Ilsabet, not Mihael, would witness the marriage on behalf of Kislova. Ilsabet walked beside the bride, holding up the veil, her expression regal, her beauty all the more noticeable because everyone had always thought her so plain.

Ilsabet had tried to decline, but Marishka had insisted. "And you will wear one of mother's gowns. Pick whichever you like. They'll all be yours soon. I want you to wear them, to remember mother and father and me."

It was so like Marishka to put herself last that Ilsabet felt tears come to her eyes. Surprised by the emotion, she rubbed them away and kissed her sister's cheek.

Ilsabet had chosen an elegant gown of pale ivory trimmed sparingly in rose-colored lace. Her white-blond hair hung simply down her back in the style she had worn as a child though it was clear from the sudden shapeliness of her body and her serene expression that in the months since her father's death she had matured quickly from girl to woman.

She wore no jewelry save a locket that had been a gift from Jorani some years before and a gold-and-ruby ring on her wedding finger. When asked about the band, she said it had been her stepmother's wedding band, left in her room after the immolation. She said this with little emotion so that the questioners could not tell if she were reminding Peto of her father's death or merely honoring the woman's memory. She'd painted her nails a deep shade of garnet, and as she watched the ceremony her fingers moved, reminding many of the nobles of the blood that had been spilled here so recently.

"It's what she intends us to recall," one of the guests whispered to another, telling those close to him about Ilsabet's challenge to Peto's power.

Marishka held out her arms, and Ilsabet helped her stand beside the bridegroom. Whatever ceremony the priests had planned was

eliminated since it was clear the girl would collapse within minutes if they didn't finish quickly. Peto and his bride exchanged vows, nothing more, and Marishka returned to her litter.

Servants carried her to the table where, propped by pillows, she sat beside Peto, raising her glass for the appropriate toasts, but drinking nothing.

Musicians played softly through the meal. After, they started the dancing with the slow, measured cadence that began the kardash, the national dance of Kislova.

"Do you know it?" Marishka asked Peto.

"I do."

"Then go. Dance with my sister."

He led Ilsabet to the floor and joined a dozen other couples. With his palms pressed against her, they began the angled steps, first facing one another then moving one step forward and to their partner's side. When the music shifted to a faster beat and a whirling melody, Peto put his hand on Ilsabet's waist. She did the same, and with their free arms held high, they began to spin.

One of the musicians handed them each a scarf-his Sundell black-and-gold, hers Kislova blue-and they held them high as they whirled.

Each subsequent set of angled steps was faster than the first, the whirling acquiring breakneck speed. Couples dropped out until only Ilsabet and Peto were left, dancing as if they were at war and this the bloodless battle to settle the matter once and for all.

The musicians settled it for them. The music slowed, stopped. Ilsabet and Peto leaned against one another, panting. As he inhaled, he smelled her perfume. Something about it made him giddy with desire, and the desire reminded him that he would not sleep tonight with his wife in his arms.

"Now there's a real couple," a drunken Kislovan merchant whispered too loudly.

Peto stiffened at the insult to his bride. With his hand balled into a fist, he took a step toward the man. Ilsabet waited, her expression unreadable. Mar-ishka, however, had heard the remark, saw Peto's reaction. "Husband," she called. "Come, sit by me."

He did as she asked, and when he leaned over to kiss her, she whispered, "Don't be angry when someone speaks the truth. I thought it myself."

Marishka retired a short time later. Peto lay beside her until she slept, then left her lying in her dress with the rosebuds in her hair. She looked so beautiful in the candlelight, so at peace that Peto said a prayer that if recovery was indeed hopeless, she would die that night, and her pain would finally end.

As she'd requested, he left her chamber doors open so that should

she wake, she would hear the distant music of her wedding feast. She'd wanted him to rejoin it, but he could not do so. Instead he stood in the shadows at the top of the stairs and listened to the dancing, the toasts, to Ilsabet's bright laughter.

Marishka died three days later, with Ilsabet, Peto, and Mihael at her bedside.

On the night after Marishka's funeral, Ilsabet stood on the battlements that faced the shore. The fog had begun to form, languid waves of it rolling against the hillside beneath Marishka's tomb. The day had been unseasonably warm, so the fog would be thick tonight, rising from the damp ground as well as the river. Soon, it would begin its insidious invasion of the castle. Every cracked window, every tiny crack between walls and doors would give it a way in.

Ilsabet's rooms would be damp tonight, but Greta would deal with the fog as she always did, building the fire on Ilsabet's hearth, keeping it burning throughout the night to be certain its cold never touched her.

Would it touch Marishka? Would it caress her as her bridegroom had never done? Ilsabet smiled, a victor's smile, and stared at the white pillars of the tomb outlined clearly by the rising quarter moon.

As she did, she thought she saw something moving toward the tomb, a silver ribbon curling though the moonlight. She stared, frightened, awed, as the ribbon coiled upon itself and rose, finally taking the wispy form of a tall, thin youth. An instant later, a cry of grief rolled over the damp land, a cry that shifted slowly into the howl of a wolf.

This is a dream, nothing more, Ilsabet thought. I am safe in my bed dreaming. Her heart pounded; she fought to catch her breath; her hands gripped the castle wall as she watched and waited, certain of what was to come.

The rest of the dread scene was played out in silence. A wolf padded to the front of the tomb, joined a moment later by a woman whose loose robes glowed in the moonlight, rising and falling in some invisible breeze.

Ilsabet almost said her sister's name aloud, but certain it would attract the attention of the ghost, she bit her lip to stifle any sound. She retreated to her room. As she walked past the place from which Dark had fallen, she felt a cold hand press against her back. Whirling, she saw no one behind her. She felt like screaming-in defiance as well as fear. Would the dead never leave her alone?

Once she was safely in her room, she sat curled in a chair close to the raging fire. For the first time in years, she cried and did not hold it back.

She was still crying when Peto arrived at her chambers. He had

come to sit beside her and take comfort in her strength. When he saw her, weeping in private as she had refused to do in public, his heart went out to her. When he sensed the terrible fear in her, he thought of her as hardly more than a beautiful child, orphaned, defeated, lost.

He wrapped his arms around her. She pressed against him and sobbed while his hand stroked her long, soft hair.

THIRTEEN

Three days after Marishka's death, Baron Peto lay in the bed he should have shared with his bride, trying to find sleep in a glass of strong, sweet Kislovan brandy. His valet knocked politely and said Mihael Obour wished to speak to him.

"I was speaking to him all afternoon," Peto responded.

"I'm sorry," Mihael said and pushed past the servant.

"Since you're here, come in," Peto said wearily. He sat up and poured Mihael a glass of brandy, wondering vaguely what was so important.

Mihael looked anxiously at Peto. The baron was using drink to drown rage more than grief, but drink had a way of making rage worse. It also made the candid conversation Mihael had hoped to have with Peto impossible. He wished he hadn't barged in so rudely, now that he had no idea what to say.

"I'd guessed your grief," he began. "I've come to offer what comfort I can."

"Comfort!" Peto laughed, a terrible mirthless sound. "I'd hoped to have children with her, to unite our kingdoms with our sons. I'd hoped for too much and now…" Without warning Peto flung his goblet across the room. The fine crystal shattered on the stones.

The valet peeked in, then withdrew at Peto's bellowed command.

"Now I'm beginning to understand why your stepmother killed herself," Peto went on. "A moment's pain is nothing compared to this sorrow."

Neither of them said anything for some time, then Mihael broke the silence. "I went looking for Lord Jorani today and learned he left yesterday for Argentine."

"You don't approve? He'd been away from his estate for some time. Since half its revenues now belong to me, I thought it wise to let him set his lands in order."

"I was only surprised that Ilsabet didn't go with him."

"She did not wish to go."

"You asked her?" Mihael could not believe the implications of this.

"Given how selflessly she nursed her sister, I could hardly banish her again so, yes, I asked her. She replied almost word for word what she'd said the night she refused to swear loyalty to me. However, she sounds far less defiant now."

"How long will Jorani be gone?" Mihael asked.

"A week or two at the most." Some of Mihael's emotion must have shown in his face, for Peto asked, "I did send some of my men with

him. Is there anything wrong?"

"I don't know," Mihael answered truthfully. "I can't shake the feeling that something more than an accident killed my sister."

All effects of the brandy seemed to vanish. Peto stood, his muscular form towering over the slight youth. "If you suspect Lord Jorani of treachery, speak," Peto demanded.

"No, I don't suspect him. But he knows more than any man in Kislova about the sort of things that might have killed her."

"The sort of things?" Peto gave a dry laugh. "Mihael, the accident was cause enough. You've only been in battle once so you can't know how common that sort of death is. I've watched countless men fall from their horses, endure no more than a few scratches, then begin to bleed inside. They die days or even weeks later, just as Marishka did. My own battle surgeon tells me that's what killed her."

What could Mihael say? That both his sisters were expert riders and the accident itself could have been arranged? That Ilsabet's sudden beauty held hints of sorcery? His parents were dead. Marishka as well. There were only Ilsabet and himself left. He could not betray her, not until he was certain. "I don't suspect anyone. It was her death itself that troubles me."

"Her death should trouble us all," Peto replied and held up a new glass in a silent toast to Marishka.

Mihael left the baron soon after, returning to his rooms. He debated what to do, then decided on the direct approach.

He found his sister in her sitting room. She still wore the black of mourning, and there was a gray blanket thrown over her legs. She was napping on one of the couches, an open book on her lap. The light streaming through the window made her pallor even more pronounced. Here, she looked no different than in times past, and he began to wonder what trick of light or emotion had made him see her as changed.

"Ilsabet," he called softly.

She opened her eyes, smiled, and sat up. Holding out her hand, she drew him down on the couch beside her.

"You look so sad. What is it?" she asked.

"I came to speak about Marishka." He watched her face as he forged on. "There is no polite way to ask this, but I must. I know how opposed you were to Marishka's swearing loyalty to Baron Peto. But when Marishka brought you back to help plan her wedding, you and she were closer than you had ever been. I have to know why you had such a change of heart?"

Ilsabet looked out the window at the cloudy sky. The light seemed to steal all color from her eyes, making them look glazed over, white, dead. "In my days alone at Argentine, I began to realize we are

all that is left of the Obours, and we must do what we can to survive and prosper. I decided my defiance of Baron Peto was ill-advised but I could see no way to mend the differences between us without losing all pride.

"Then Marishka wrote me about her marriage and asked me to come home. I did, and though I was opposed to the match, I thought it an expedient move for our family. Now she is gone, and there is only you." She paused, and her eyes widened with disbelief. Tears came to them, tears she tried in vain to hide. "You suspect me of killing her, don't you?"

Mihael had never seen his sister cry. Perhaps so much grief had worn down her defenses and softened her. "You've never spoken so openly about your feelings before. I had no way of knowing," he said sincerely.

"Does Peto think I had a part in Marishka's death?"

"I don't know," Mihael answered. "I hope not."

"Mihael, what am I to do?"

She'd also never asked his advice before. He looked at her and answered with words he expected would send her into one of her well-known rages. "Swear now," he said. "Peto hasn't asked it. If you do it of your own free will, your pride will be intact."

Surprisingly, she nodded, and actually seemed to be considering his advice when he left her.

Like Mihael, Jorani was troubled by Marishka's accident, illness, and death. Like Mihael, he dared not mention his suspicions to anyone.

Once he'd arrived and settled in, he began questioning his staff, concentrating finally on Rilca, who seemed to have spent the most time with Ilsabet.

The woman happily described the girl's interest in plants, and how she had wandered the fields alone. "She followed me around the kitchen asking me about the healing herbs and roots. I told her everything I knew. We got along well. When I was ill, she sat by my side every day reading to me."

Jorani had never known Rilca to complain of anything, but she was getting older and her joints had stiffened. "You were ill?" he asked.

"Stomach cramps such as I'd never felt before. I think my tonic had gone bad. I'd never known it to taste so bitter. I threw it out and blended some teas to help the pains go away."

At his prompting, she described her symptoms. They were so similar to Marishka's that Jorani became certain Ilsabet was at least guilty of allowing her sister's death. Otherwise, she would have

mentioned Rilca's remedies.

"I've been teaching her some things myself," he said. "It would help to know about the plants you discussed."

Rilca told him. There had been nothing odd in their discussions of angelica and feverfew, or in the concoction of horseheal and mallow Rilca had suggested for Ilsabet's chronic cough. "We even discussed the old myths," Rilca continued, "like the banning of marjoram at a wedding feast and the eating of columbine seeds to hasten a baby's arrival and the old tale of what happens when you eat black nettle."

She prattled happily on for a few more minutes. Jorani barely listened. He'd just learned what poison had killed Marishka, as well as how it had been delivered.

As soon as he left Rilca, he went to the rooms Ilsabet had occupied. A careful examination of the drawers and cupboards revealed nothing, but when he sifted through the ashes in the bucket beside the hearth, he found bits of pottery and a black tar stuck to a few of the pieces. He took these to his own room. There he diluted the tarry substance with water until it formed a thick paste. He dabbed it onto his arm. A few minutes later when the blisters began to rise, he knew what Ilsabet had done.

Weeks passed, but he remained at Argentine, getting his estate in far better order than his emotions. Finally, he received an urgent letter from Lieutenant Shaul asking that he return:

"… In the last few days, there have been three mysterious deaths in the dungeons of the castle. The victims were outlaws who had been preying on shipments of goods between Kislova and Sundell. They'd been jailed in the town but escaped. When recaptured, they were brought here, as it is well known that no one escapes the castle's cells.

"They were hard, dangerous men, and they would have undoubtedly been executed after evidence against them was heard. However, in the days before their hearing, they began having frequent fallings-out. When they came to blows, they were separated.

"On the night before their hearing, one of the prisoners began to scream as if in terrible pain. The guard held a torch close to the cell but could see no reason for the man's agony. Because of the man's history, he decided the screams were some sort of trick to get him to open the cell door, and he ignored them. Later, the other outlaws also began to cry out, but again the guard could see nothing and thought it a trick.

"Gradually, the screams subsided. The guard assumed the men had tired of their useless ruse. In the morning, when trays of food were brought, two of the men were dead, the third unconscious. All had welts covering their bodies, as if they had been burned with hot coals. Indeed, it seemed they felt as if they were burning, for they had

clawed at their clothing and scratched their skin trying to put out the invisible flames. The one survivor remains unconscious, but cries out often.

"Our healer suspects some plague. I remember the rats and wonder.

"The baron asked me to write you to return at once and lend us what assistance you can…"

Unable to ignore the summons, Jorani set a slow pace back to the castle, still not knowing what course to take, certain of only two things-

A single word or even a suggestion to Peto of what Ilsabet had done, and she would be killed; rightfully so.

And he could not bear to see her die.

When he reached the castle, he found the courtyard more crowded than it had been on Peto's ill-fated wedding day. Merchants from Pirie mingled with the Sundell officers and Kislovan nobles. Lord Ruven had even traveled from Tygelt along with his wife, Alasyn, a beautiful woman with a quiet dignity that had impressed Jorani often.

The Sundell guards who had ridden in with Jorani went directly to the stables, leaving him holding tightly to the reins of his nervous horse and trying to find a servant to take it from him.

"What's going on?" he finally asked one of the sta-bleboys who was trying to lead Lord Ruven's spirited team away from the crowd before someone was injured by their hooves.

"The baron is holding a feast for the Baroness Ilsabet."

"A feast is it? Whatever for?"

"She's going to swear her loyalty to him."

The words had all the effect of a hard blow between the eyes. For an instant, Jorani was speechless with shock and astonishment. Then, he thrust his horse's reins into a servant's hand and ran up the stairs to his tower room where he washed and dressed quickly.

In a different section of the castle, Ilsabet stood in the center of her dressing room surrounded by Mar-ishka's legacy. Her mother's gowns were there, Mar-ishka's own, and the few pieces that Lady Lorena had given her-all of them reminders of the Obour women who had died.

Greta had used all her considerable skill on Ilsa-bet's thin hair. She'd tied it at the crown then used the hot iron to form tight ringlets that fell over her mistress's shoulders. When she'd finished, she helped Ilsabet into the gown she'd chosen.

"Leave me," she said to Greta.

Once alone, Ilsabet studied herself in the mirror, trying to see

what Peto would see. She pictured herself, the demure subject, kneeling before him-swearing allegiance for the sake of peace between their families, their countries. Swearing, she had made it clear to him, not because he'd ordered her to do so, but because he had earned her respect.

Just before she turned to go, she put of few drops of perfume at her temples and in the hollow between her breasts. Marishka had worn a scent much like this. Ilsabet had enhanced it a bit, enough to make it as potent as it was beautiful.

She heard a knock, then Mihael politely asking if he could escort her down. She knew Mihael privately gloated. No doubt he had spent the better part of the last few days congratulating himself for being so blunt with her. How would he feel, she wondered, if he knew that she had already made her decision and had been merely waiting for him to suggest it?

She saw no point in openly opposing him. Tonight she would kneel before Peto, would kiss his foot. A moment of debasement and the last barrier between Peto and his new Kislovan subjects would end. Peto was homesick, and Marishka's death had made it worse. It was only a matter of time before Peto left here, and he had already pledged to put Mihael in charge.

Kislova would return to the Obours. They would not have the power they once did, but at least an Obour would rule. And someday the power would return to them; she had her plans ready to assure it.

By the time Jorani joined the other guests below, he'd heard the rumors concerning Ilsabet's apparent change of heart. The servants could speak of little else but the sounds of weeping coming from Ilsabet's room, the quiet conversations between sister and brother, ending with her decision to swear loyalty to her new lord.

Jorani knew no one could persuade Ilsabet to do anything she did not want to do. Certain of this, he stood with the other guests and watched Ilsabet enter the room, hoping for an answer to the puzzle of her actions.

The crowd parted when Ilsabet entered, falling silent when they saw her. She had chosen a simple gown of deep green silk. The color made her fair complexion look even lighter and gave it a translucent quality as well. Features that had once been almost gaunt now appeared delicate. Eyes that were once considered pale now seemed exotic. Her hair curled and shone like platinum against the deeply colored fabric.

As she walked straight to the raised table where Peto was waiting, she moved confidently, serenely; a queen secure in her castle, mistress of the halls and the people within them.

The change from the plain, shy girl who dreamt of power to this magnificently beautiful woman was so sudden and so striking, it seemed to Jorani there had to be some kind of sorcery involved.

When she stood before Peto, they both hesitated, and for a moment it seemed Peto might kneel before her. She broke the tension, falling to one knee, reciting the oath in a loud, clear voice, then pressing her lips to his boot. When she moved back, he took her hand, helping her to her feet.

She turned to face the nobles and the wealthy of Kislova and said, "I swear allegiance to Baron Peto Casse not because of any threat he made to me, but because I have seen the peace he has brought to our people, and the promise of a prosperous alliance of our domains."

The musicians began a slow romantic song. Jorani wondered if it had been on Peto's cue or Ilsa-bet's. As he watched, still stunned by the incredible changes in her, Peto led her into the center of the room and began the intricate motions of the dance. With their arms raised, their palms touching, they began circling right, then left. The tempo quickened. They moved closer together and began the elegant steps of a stylized waltz, whirling around the edge of the dance floor.

Peto seemed pale, dizzy, but when the dance ended, he stayed with Ilsabet for another, and another. The band knew what their lord wished. The waltzes continued while Peto held her close, smiling at her wit, laughing when she laughed.

Jorani heard no mutter of Peto's fickleness and how he should not be flirting with the sister of his dead bride only weeks after the funeral. Instead the guests were all smiling happily, commenting on Ilsa-bet's brief speech as if they were witnessing some idealized growing romance between their queen and an invading lord.

Though the daughters of Kislovan petty aristocracy were lined up to dance with the baron, he stayed with Ilsabet. She danced as if she had no problems with her lungs, with weakness, with being touched by a man she'd said often enough that she despised.

With the girl's plan so clear, Jorani could not understand how Peto and the others could miss it. Through marriage, Ilsabet could reclaim control of the Obour lands.

The invasion her father had begun would be complete with an exchange of vows, followed at a polite interval by an heir, then a vial of poison, first for Peto, and if she desired both kingdoms, a second for Mihael.

With that, she would rule for her son not one kingdom, but two.

And Jorani had planted the terrible seed of her ambitions.

He left the fete early and went upstairs. Before retiring, he stole into his hidden room and took a careful look around. Books had been moved. His supplies of candles and lamp oil were depleted. His

collection of herbs and exotic poisons had been touched and studied though nothing seemed to be missing.

With a shudder, he considered all that Ilsabet might have learned on her own.

FOURTEEN

After Peto took over Nimbus Castle, Mihael and Jorani sat at his side during all meetings of state, suggesting changes to bring about peace.

Nobles who once served Baron Janosk were persuaded to ally with Peto. Some required little persuasion, all along preferring peace over honor and fighting only out of fear of Janosk. Most of his true supporters were won over when Mihael swore allegiance to Peto, then used a skillful blend of bribes and threats to assure that other Kislovan nobles did the same.

At Mihael's suggestion, Peto mollified the rebels with return of some of the lands the nobles had taken from them years before. He forgave back-taxes owed by rebel and loyalist alike who had lost fathers and sons during the rebellion. At Jorani's suggestion, he sent Obour soldiers into the countryside to assist with the spring plantings. By working side by side for a common cause under the watchful eyes of Sundell guards, resentments between rebels and soldiers faded somewhat, enough that there had already been four marriages between Kislova soldiers and fatherless families in Pirie alone-more in the outlying areas. Kislovan blood ran hot, but cooled just as quickly, Peto decided.

Peto had meditated on all these accomplishments in the days after Marishka died but they'd brought him little comfort. Every now-familiar room in Nimbus Castle reminded him of her-of her beauty in life, the agony of her illness, and the irrefutable fact that she had moved beyond his touch until death claimed him.

Let Mihael have this cursed land and all its bloody memories, he decided. At the feast in Ilsabet's honor, he would announce that he was leaving.

That evening, as Peto had waited with his guests for Ilsabet to appear, he had gone over the words of his speech. In it, he had intended to mention Mihael's and his efforts to promote peace in Kislova. He would praise Mihael's honesty and assure everyone that nothing would hamper the fledgling alliance between the two countries.

Then Ilsabet Obour entered. As the sea of faces beneath his raised platform parted, he looked toward her. And forgot the speech, his loneliness, everything.

After she gave her oath, he reached down to take her hand, and she looked up at him. Her eyes were the palest blue, white circles around the pupils as pronounced as those around the iris.

Why had he never seen them as beautiful before?

Then the music began. It seemed wrong not to dance with her. It was a formality; but as he breathed in her perfume and looked down at her delicate face, he felt an odd vertigo. It stayed with him through the first slow motions of the dance, then passed.

Replaced by anxiousness? Desire?

He only knew that he stayed with her through the evening, leaving her with regret after the feast was over. Later, when he was alone in bed, he thought of how the night had gone and realized that, though he could remember her face and her delicate hands, he could not recall the color of her dress, or the design of the brooch pinned to her gown, or even what she had said to him during their hours together.

Yet he thought himself in love, and the intensity of it troubled him.

He did not think of himself as an inconstant man. He mourned Marishka, and would undoubtedly do so for the rest of his life. If so, why was he inflicted with such desire that he felt like an inexperienced youth in his first infatuation?

Marishka, he thought. If only you had lived, none of this would be happening. A pleasant thought, but was it true? From the day Ilsabet Obour had defied him so courageously, he had admired her. Perhaps, had he been paying closer attention, he might have come to love her rather than Marishka.

Terrible thoughts, yet they stayed with him as he went to sleep and dreamt of his lost bride.

They danced at her wedding feast, Marishka's delicate hands on his shoulders as they whirled through the hall. He smelled the rosebuds in the garland she wore, the scented candles that lit the space. She was whole, strong. He had never felt so thankful.

Others joined them. The dance quickened, breaking finally into a raucous folk dance. The hammered dulcimers set the pace as he and Marishka began weaving through the guests. In the midst of all his joy, the doors of the great hall swung open and the thick Kislova fog rolled through the room, covering the now silent guests, wrapping around Marishka until he could no longer see her. He heard her terrified cry and followed it into the entrance hall. The fog was even thicker there, lying like a blanket over the floor, covering him from the neck down.

Marishka's cries grew more distant, then faded altogether. He saw motion on the stairs above him and looked up. Ilsabet stood at the top, looking down at him. She wore Marishka's wedding dress. Her hair was arranged the same but the roses in her garland were dyed black for mourning. Though she looked at him with love, there were tears in her eyes mirroring the tears in his.

He woke, called in his guards and began giving orders. A short time later, accompanied only by Shaul and a second escort, he rode down the narrow peninsula to the mainland and began the steady climb to the tomb on the cliffs above.

The river moved languidly somewhere in the fog below him. He could hear the slow current trickling over the rocks and the few pieces of deadfall that collected in the pools near the shore. An owl circled in the moonlit sky, its distant cry echoed by the screech of a pair of forest cats and the howl of a lonely wolf.

The stone tomb rose from the black base of its shadow, its white pillars stark in the moonlight. Peto dismounted and handed the reins to his lieutenant. With his lamp held high, he walked forward alone. Though the entrance had been locked, it now hung open. He went inside, fearing that robbers had come and stripped Marishka's body of all its lace and silk, or worse that the coffin would be empty and he would forever wonder what fate had befallen her body.

But she lay as she had at the service. The embal-mers had done their jobs well, the only change in her was that some of the wax that fixed her expression had broken off, leaving her with lips slightly parted. It seemed as if she were smiling, and though he knew it must only be the natural changes of a decaying corpse, it made him glad.

"Marishka," he whispered. "I am so confused. What shall I do?"

He'd expected no reply, but he seemed to hear one anyway, borne in the soft breeze that touched the forest around the clearing.

"Ilsabet," it whispered. The sound held no warmth, nor any coldness, he thought, as if the spirit who spoke had moved beyond the pettiness of human emotion.

"I'll never forget you, Marishka," he said.

As he bent to touch her hand, he heard a growl coming from the deep shadows behind the coffin and its marble slab. Eyes glowed in the lamplight. He held the lamp higher and saw a white wolf, crouched and ready to attack. He stepped back, his hand on the hilt of his sword, but the animal remained where it was.

"Do you guard my Marishka?" Peto asked. "If so, I thank you." With a respectful bow, he backed from the tomb and retreated to where his escorts were waiting.

"It's a strange land," Shaul commented as they rode away.

Peto mumbled something in agreement. Just before they began their descent, he turned and looked at the tomb again.

The wolf had followed him outside. Now it sat in front of the doors. Some trick of light and shadow made it seem as if someone stood beside it, arm raised in farewell.

He recalled little of his ride back to Nimbus Castle. When he woke the following morning, none of his servants mentioned his

abrupt exit the night before. He didn't either lest he discover that the entire journey had been one long and vivid dream.

Days passed during which he went about his work hoping for a few moments of conversation with Ilsa-bet. Usually they dined together, along with Mihael who still tasted Peto's food. When Peto suggested that given the peaceful state of Kislova such precautions were no longer necessary, Mihael only replied, "These are my people. I will not see you a victim of hatreds my family incited."

Mihael's constant apologies on behalf of the Obours irritated him. At least Ilsabet was proud of her lineage and stood up for her father. She'd even managed to make her oath to him less a concession to a conqueror than an acceptance of his skill at governing. He wasn't the only one impressed by her. Even Shaul, who had thought the Obours hardly more than savages, spoke often of her courage and beauty.

But if Ilsabet haunted his thoughts by day, Marishka controlled his nights. He would dream of her. In the dreams, they were always together in the beginning, and they always ended the same way-with Marishka walking away from him with the white wolf at her side. It seemed Marishka was telling him to accept the end of their life together. Another should take her place.

He began to seek out Ilsabet's company, to ask her advice on matters of state. At first, she seemed surprised by his questions, but her answers were always sensible and just. He flattered her and took her gifts, which she accepted as if they were her due. It always seemed she longed to send him away but did not. This intrigued him; if she did not like his company, she would be direct enough to make that plain.

One morning he found her standing on the battlements looking across the river toward her sister's tomb. "Do you think it a barbaric custom?" he asked.

"I think you loved her very much, so much that I wonder if you'll ever be able to love another."

"I think it's already happened," he said and took her hand. She did not pull away. "I dreamt she gave permission for me to love you," he said.

Ilsabet smiled, but it did not have the beauty he was used to seeing in her face. She seemed to have faded in the days since the feast. Perhaps the mourning drained the life from her; it certainly seemed to have done the same to him.

"That would be like her," Ilsabet said. "What did she tell you?"

"Nothing. But she came to me, sat with me, then walked into the shadows with a white wolf at her side."

"A wolf?" Ilsabet looked confused and frightened.

"Does the white wolf have some special meaning?" he asked.

"No, only that my sister had a fear of wolves. So do I. Natural enough, in this land," she said with a fleeting, anxious smile.

"It was just a dream. Would you like to visit her tomb?"

"No." Her fear had intensified. "It's… it's too close to the spot where Marishka had her accident. The place holds so many tragic memories, I'm astonished you can even stand to look at it." She pulled away from him and backed toward the doorway to the tower.

"Don't go yet," he said. "Let's walk for a while… on the riverbank."

He led her down the outside stairs, through the rear gates to the path that ran along the bank. The water lilies had spread their leaves in the pools, and two of the creamy pink blossoms had already opened. The air was warm, thick, heavy with scents; he'd learned enough to know the fog would be thick tonight.

"Have you ever thought of leaving here?" he asked.

"This is my home," she said, softening the now-familiar phrase with a sweet smile.

"Someplace drier, more elegant, not so filled with all the relics of the past."

She turned and looked at him. "Are you suggesting Sundell?" she asked.

"I'm asking you to think about it, that's all."

"So soon," she whispered and looked at him with her magnificent pale eyes.

"Consider it, that's all," he said. "I must go. Your brother, Lord Jorani, and I are going to discuss how to deal with the outlaws near the Sundell border.

Shall we walk back?"

"No, I'd like to stay here for a little while. The calm helps me think."

Ilsabet was astonished at how sweetly she could smile when all she felt was triumph. She paced along the riverbank, considering the implications: Had he actually suggested that they marry? She'd wanted him to feel some passion for her, for lust would blind him to the truth of what she'd done. But marriage?

Mihael had thought of it. She'd seen Jorani standing on the edge of the crowd. He'd considered it as well. The idea had struck her as ludicrous until now.

She had kissed his feet. She could as easily kiss his lips. As for the other, well he might have her body but never her soul. And when the time was right, when Mihael had stopped his constant tasting of Peto's food, she would act, and he would die. Mihael would rule Kislova. She would rule Sundell in the name of Peto's heir.

In the meantime, she would learn everything she needed to know. Whatever poison she chose would be slow, painful, perfect for revenge. She looked across the cold, placid water toward the forest.

Kislova. Obour lands once; Obour lands again.

Though she did not intend to do so, she raised her eyes toward the hilltop and Marishka's tomb. She could not see it from this angle but sensed her sister's presence there, and was thankful that no figure in white and no silver wolf stood there to reproach her.

She stared at the land a few moments longer, then turned and walked quickly to her castle, her room.

As she opened the door, she saw Greta standing in front of her cupboard, Janosk's bloodstained garments in her hand.

FIFTEEN

"What are you doing?" Ilsabet demanded.

Greta whirled. "I heard something rustling in the cupboard. I thought it might be a rat, and considering what happened before, I looked." She held out the stained fabric and showed Ilsabet the ragged hole in it. "There was a rat. It was gnawing on this."

The poisoned kerchief fell from inside the folded fabric. As it hit the ground it opened. "What is this?" Greta asked, bending down to pick it up.

"No! Leave it alone!" Ilsabet cried.

With her hand almost brushing the lace hem, Greta looked up at Ilsabet and saw the fear in her expression. She glanced down at the tarry ball in the kerchief, then pulled herself upright.

Ilsabet expected to be questioned, interrogated as if she were Greta's child. Instead Greta said nothing and looked away.

She couldn't possibly know what the substance was, Ilsabet decided. But she must have heard the rumors of why Ilsabet had been sent to Argentine, and like every servant in Nimbus Castle, she knew what skills Jorani could teach.

Ilsabet took a deep breath and steeled herself for what must be done. She picked up the kerchief by the lace hem, set it on the table and began, "Have you noticed a change in me, Greta?"

The woman looked at her, frowned, nodded. "You've become so beautiful," she said. "Not that you weren't beautiful to me before, but now there is an added quality. The whole castle speaks of it and how Baron Peto cannot keep his eyes off you." She spoke quickly, as if the compliments could somehow make Ilsabet forget what she had discovered.

"At Argentine, I spent much of my time in Lord Jorani's library reading the books and journals of his work. One of them contained the recipe for this ugly mass. If you take a small bit of it and swallow it, it spreads through your body, taking plain features such as mine and making them beautiful. In older people, it takes away the signs of age. I talked to Rilca the cook about that. Do you know her?"

"I met her once when we traveled to Argentine, but that was years ago."

"Do you know that she looks younger than when you or I saw her last?"

"She must be nearing seventy," Greta said, staring at her mistresses face. Greta believed Ilsabet if only because of what her own two eyes had revealed.

"And looks a decade younger," Ilsabet went on. "She says she may

even wed again for the fifth time."

"I see." Greta glanced at the kerchief, thinking no doubt of her own suitor, and how she had never been married even once.

"On her deathbed, Marishka asked me to wed Baron Peto," Ilsabet went on. "Such an alliance would be for the good of our people. But he had never looked me with any interest, so I used what I learned. It succeeded beyond my wildest dreams.

"You must promise to tell no one," she continued. "I would not want Peto to hear any rumors about how I caught his eye. He has a temper. I'd prefer he not have reason to lose it."

"I understand," Greta said. "I won't say a word."

She watched carefully as Ilsabet wrapped the kerchief around the tarry mass.

Ilsabet settled for the truth about the clothes. "After Father was killed, I took this to remember how he died, and how I hated those who killed him. Now I keep it because his scent is on it-his blood, his body. I loved him and I will not give it up."

"If anyone found it, they might not understand why you chose such a memento," Greta replied evenly.

"Do you?"

Greta hesitated, then nodded. "But you should protect it better if you wish to keep it," Greta said. "I saw a beautiful carved wooden box for sale last time I visited Pirie. It has a lock and key to keep your treasure safe from prying eyes as well as vermin. Perhaps you'd like me to buy it for you?"

"I'm so glad you understand." Ilsabet hugged her, then took the clothing, folded it carefully around the kerchief, and returned them both to their hiding place.

"Should I go?" Greta asked.

"Not yet. Come and unhook this gown. It's getting so much warmer in the afternoon, I want to put on something lighter." When Greta had, Ilsabet pushed it to the floor and stepped out of it. She sat at her dressing table and unpinned her hair. It fell in a silky mass over her bare shoulders and the ivory lace chemise. Greta picked up a silver hairbrush and began running it through Ilsabet's hair, watching her face in the mirror all the while.

Ilsabet noted the way Greta looked at her eyes, her lips, her skin, and she knew the old woman accepted her story completely. "The peach-color gown has a looser cut. It would be cooler," Greta suggested when she'd finished.

"Not yet," Ilsabet said. "I think I'll lie down until dinner."

"Then I'll leave you." Greta retreated, looking pleased to be dismissed.

Perhaps the story Ilsabet had invented would keep Greta quiet,

but only for a while. How long before she spoke of this? How long before Jorani and Peto heard the gossip and came to question her? She knew of no potion or electuary that would do what she told Greta the black nettle tar would do. And she could think of no lie to explain the one she'd already told.

If she wished to ever have her vengeance, to ever sit in the ruler's chair of Kislova or even live to see another spring, she had to act quickly. And she was thankful: acting quickly would keep her from brooding on what she had to do. Moments later, she wrapped a black robe around her body and disappeared into the secret passage leading to Jorani's hidden room.

She used a single cased candle to light her way. Rats scurried through the tunnel, fleeing the light. One moved too slowly, and she kicked it away, pleased to hear its pained squeal. Once she reached the hidden chamber, Ilsabet went directly to the hanging glass globe that held Jorani's precious spider.

At first it seemed Jorani had been ignoring the creature. It was curled into a tight gray ball in the center of its cloudlike web. When Ilsabet moved too close to it, it uncurled and charged her, its gray-and-white legs beating against the glass.

She pulled a cricket from Jorani's feeding cage and dropped it in the web. Smiling at the bug's impotent struggles, she watched the little spider move on its struggling prey. She watched it feed.

When it had finished and rested with legs outstretched in an all too perfect parody of a sated human, Ilsabet took from her pocket a second lace-trimmed kerchief exactly like the one holding her black nettle poison. This one however contained a black molasses cookie, which she had crumbled and reformed with a bit of water. It did not exactly resemble the nettle tar, but Ilsabet doubted Greta had taken a good look at the noxious ball.

Once she had done this, she slipped on a pair of leather gloves and carefully brushed the fake ball against the web, creating a poison far more potent than the one Greta had discovered.

She wrapped the contents carefully in the kerchief, wrapped the kerchief itself in another scarf, and hid the deadly package in her pocket. After a quick glance around to assure her nothing had been disturbed, she returned to her room by the same dark route.

She had been gone less than an hour.

As soon as she had everything safely packed away in her cupboard, she dressed and rang for Greta, not at all surprised when the woman did not appear. Now that she had her excuse, she went downstairs. The cook gave her some slices o" f warm bread and honey. While she ate them, she kept an eye out for Garvin, the Sundell guardsman whom Greta often mentioned.

Peto's guards ate in shifts. She was fortunate Garvin was in the early group. When she saw him, she called him over.

"I understand you've been paying some compliments to my servant," she said.

His eyes narrowed. He frowned. Ilsabet hardly thought him handsome, but she wasn't over fifty and half again the weight she ought to be. Greta could hardly afford to be choosy. "No one told me I couldn't," he muttered.

"Her work has suffered. I prefer that she keep her mind on it."

"Is that an order, then?" he asked.

"A suggestion." Ilsabet slid a pair of silver coins across the table. "Be firm when you let her down today," she said in a low voice. "I would not want her to pine away, thinking you've any interest in her."

"And if I still do?"

"One more is all you'll get and only if you act tonight," Ilsabet replied coldly.

She left him to his supper and his thoughts, certain he'd do as she wished.

She found Greta upstairs, dusting her room. The cupboard had not been dusted, and Ilsabet was certain the woman was deliberately avoiding it.

After Greta had helped her dress for the evening meal, Ilsabet said, "I saw that Sundell guard in the kitchen. He was asking about you."

"He was?"

Ilsabet laughed, "Go on down, I can finish here."

Later, when she left the room, she didn't blow out the candle. All the better for Greta to see her way when she returned.

Greta had spent all afternoon thinking about Ilsa-bet's revelation. The temptation to take some of the concoction was tremendous, but she resisted until Garvin made it clear he had no interest in her.

She found out in a simple enough way. When she walked into the kitchen, one of the scullery maids was sitting on his lap, running her fingers over the dome of his bald head.

He stood up too quickly when he saw her. His face went red, and he muttered something about the difference in years between them.

Fighting tears, Greta returned to the upstairs chambers. Ilsabet had gone, and Greta was thankful.

When she was feeling sad, Greta would often sit at Ilsabet's dressing table, looking into the priceless silver mirror, dreaming of what it would be like to be the lady of this castle, the mistress of all around her.

She did so now, but the daydream held no comfort. All she could

see were the lines in her face, her thinning hair.

Ilsabet would never miss the loss of a tiny bit of her magic. And if Greta were careful, she could hide the changes. Ilsabet would never know.

She opened the cabinet and rummaged inside until her hand closed over the red silk scarf that hid the kerchief. Frightened of discovery, she unwrapped the contents quickly.

As she pinched off a small piece of the soft black mass, she kept her senses focused on the hall. It would not do for Ilsabet to come back unexpected and find her in the act.

The very feel of it in her hand made her dizzy. She ate it quickly, but as she tried to wrap the package to return it to its hiding place, her hands went numb, her knees gave way. Even then, she thought it was the magic working, and fell without making a sound. Though she still breathed, she could not speak. Though her eyes were still open, she saw nothing.

Kashi found her and screamed for help.

Ilsabet was summoned from dinner. Peto and Jorani followed her to her chambers. As she knelt beside Greta, her attention fixed on her servant, Peto saw the kerchief. His hand moved toward it.

"No!" Ilsabet cried and grabbed his wrist.

"Ilsabet is right," Jorani said. "Greta may well have been poisoned. The touch alone could be deadly. Leave it where it is until I return."

Peto pulled his hand back and looked at the dour man. Friend and advisor to his enemy, poisoner if the rumors about him were correct, yet Peto was now twice in his debt. He wondered if the deaths since he had come to Nimbus Castle were some sort of deadly play designed to push him into some unknown action. If so, who was writing the script, and was his own death a part of the plot?

If it were, Jorani could have killed him a dozen times over. As for Ilsabet, holding her servant close to her chest, whispering endearments, she could only be innocent.

Greta died minutes later, with Ilsabet still holding her. Even then, Ilsabet remained where she was, kneeling on the floor, hugging her until Peto reached down and gently pulled her to her feet.

As he did, he was struck with the same incredible passion he had felt the evening she swore loyalty to him. It was the brightness of her eyes, he thought, and the way she so stoically hid her grief. As he held her, he wished they were still on the riverbank, discussing happier days.

Jorani returned moments later, carrying a mongoose the cook kept in the kitchen to kill the rats that were constantly trying to destroy her larder.

He placed the creature on a table, then slipped on a pair of gloves

and put the kerchief beside it. The animal sniffed at the dark mass. Smelling only molasses and flour, it tried to nibble at the edge, but Jorani held it back. Instead, he placed the animal's paw on the sticky lump and waited. The mongoose shuddered, rolled onto its side, and died that instant.

Ilsabet gave a strangled cry and turned to Peto. "It's not you they want to kill, is it? The poison was wrapped in my kerchief. If I had come back early from the meal and touched that horrid thing, it would be me lying there," she said, then pressed against him, trembling like a frail bird in his arms.

"You and Mihael have come to mean a great deal to me in the last few months. I won't let any harm come to you," Peto said.

"No harm? Your servants are in our halls. Your cook prepares the meals. Your healer treats our illnesses and injuries. Which of them was untouched by our invasion? Which has no reason to hate the Obours?"

He winced at the truth of what she said. "Hatred means nothing without knowledge," he reminded her. "I'll find the one who has both."

"My father. My stepmother. My sister. Now the servant who raised me. You'd best hunt quickly, Baron Peto, or there won't be any of us left."

Peto kept his word. By the following evening when the servants were laying the wood for Greta's funeral pyre, his surgeon, his healer, and two of his soldiers who had lost relatives during Baron Janosk's ill-fated invasion were already on their way back to Sundell. In doing this, Peto acted against the advice of his own advisors, as well as Jorani.

"The poisoner could easily be one of our own servants," Jorani had argued. "We caught a great many spies in the castle during the civil war. It's quite possible that we overlooked one or two."

Mihael had nodded, but his support was vague, as if his thoughts were elsewhere.

"I'd feel more comfortable if I knew what sort of poison it was." Peto had looked to Jorani as he said this. Jorani shook his head, appearing as perplexed as he had earlier.

When he'd dismissed his staff, Peto had asked Jorani to remain behind. "Is there anything you wish to say to me in private?" he questioned.

"I wish there were," Jorani replied.

"I want you to know that whatever means you feel are necessary to end these strange deaths will have my blessing," he said.

Jorani understood exactly what Peto meant. He locked eyes with the baron for a moment, then bowed and left. Through the funeral ceremony he said little to Peto, nothing to Ilsabet. He left as soon as

the pyre had flared.

He had not lied about his confusion. Though he'd seen no signs of the silky spiderwebs in the substance that had killed Greta, nothing else would have destroyed the mongoose so quickly, and Ilsabet was the only one who had access to the spider's poison.

Peto had just given him permission to end the poisonings by whatever means were necessary. And he had the means, didn't he? The means were all around him.

Jorani had never believed himself a weak-willed man until now. But as he sat, trying to consider the most humane means to end Ilsabet's life, he knew he could never do it. Nonetheless, he had to confront her, to find out why the woman closest to her had to die. Even at this late hour, he doubted she'd be sleeping. He picked up a lamp and went downstairs. Just outside her door, he encountered Mihael. The young man seemed as troubled as he and asked to speak to him in private.

Jorani could well imagine the subject, as he followed Mihael down the hall to his rooms.

SIXTEEN

Ilsabet had not slept more than a few hours since Greta's death.

Each time she closed her eyes, her mind took her back to those few moments she had held Greta before the woman had died. The pain, the fear of death, the terror of Greta's last moments had coursed through Ilsabet, filling her with energy as an empty goblet might be filled with wine. It seemed that in some unfathomable way she had fed on Greta's agony.

As soon as she was able, Ilsabet had fled her own rooms and the men bending over Greta's body. She took refuge for a time in her sister's chambers. The tall oval mirror before which Marishka had preened in her fancy gowns now reflected Ilsabet. Yet, if Ilsabet had not known it was a mirror, she would have thought the reflection was someone else-someone delicate, pure, and incredibly beautiful.

She could not ignore the obvious any longer-something was changing her, and it was not the deaths themselves.

She knew this to be true because she'd fed at other times: sitting with Peto as Marishka died, she had feasted on his grief; in Argentine she had sat at Rilca's bedside, not out of devotion but to take energy from the woman's pain.

But she'd only become certain of the change in her in the days before she swore allegiance to Peto, when she had poisoned the three imprisoned outlaws. No one cared, she had told herself then. And there had been no prisoners in Nimbus castle for weeks before they came. Here was a perfect chance to test a new poison.

Ah, such delusion.

She'd chosen the poison because it would cause pain, would make them scream, would give her the excitement of standing in the black depths of the subterranean space, listening to their agony.

She wasn't disappointed by the effect on her. As the screams began, wild excitement filled her. Its intensity gave such pleasure that she bit the palm of her hand lest she cry out and reveal her presence. As wave after wave of pain caressed her, she stood swaying on her feet. She retreated long after the cries ended and death came to her far-from-innocent victims. Then she ran as quickly as the slimy stairs would allow through the passages to her room. After, she stood in front of her mirror, laughing, then crying in awe of the beauty of her face, her hands, her hair.

The beauty had faded a bit since the night she had bowed to Peto. Now, standing in front of Marishka's mirror, she saw that it had returned. As she looked, trying to make sense of this curious change, she saw another reflection forming in the glass. It had the familiar

auburn hair, the buxom body, the magnificent eyes. Ghosts did not reflect, did they? Hadn't she heard somewhere that they didn't reflect?

"Who are you!" Ilsabet whispered, and turned.

Her sister was behind Ilsabet. Marishka's tiny feet hovered above the flagstone floor, her hair floated insubstantial as a cloud over her white, thin shoulders. Ilsabet stared at her sister and slowly backed away. As she did, she heard the distant howl of a wolf.

"There will be no rest for your soul if you continue with your plans," Marishka whispered.

"As if there is rest now!" Ilsabet retorted. Though she was certain anyone seeing her would think her mad, ilsabet threw an arm over her eyes so she was not tempted to look at Marishka, and she ran down the hall to her now empty rooms.

Greta's spectre waited in the outer chamber. Her skin had the bluish tint of someone dying from lack of air, and she had a look of betrayal and reproach on her round face. Ilsabet gave a strangled cry and backed toward the door, though she dared not open it for fear her sister would be waiting in the hall. Instead, she bolted past the ghost into her sleeping chamber and slammed and locked the door.

Building up the fire, she lay in a tight ball in her bed, her eyes wide open until well after dawn, when she got a few hours of restless sleep.

The strange beauty she had noticed last night had subsided somewhat by the following morning. No wonder, she thought, as she studied the circles under her eyes, the sallow look to her skin. She stayed in her rooms all day. That evening she left them only because her absence at Greta's funeral would have been noted and questioned.

She wore a dark cape, the hood pulled up so shadows would hide her face. Though she stood close to Peto and her brother, her attention was fixed on the feelings of the other servants, who had formed a wide circle around the pyre.

Many of them were as old as Greta and had known her for years. Some were crying. Others were stoically standing there, wondering with quiet fear who had poisoned her and which one of them would be next.

She felt traces of the same energy she'd experienced when Greta died, but now she began to understand it, even warm to it. By the time the ceremony was over, she would be able to look at Peto through the same magnificent eyes he found so irresistible. It troubled her that this beauty came from devouring the emotions of death and pain. Yet it seemed a small price to pay for revenge.

But a thought had begun to nag at her, a feeling that when her vengeance was complete, she would still need to poison, to cause pain, to kill. Like a vampire, she might have no choice but to feed.

She dismissed the thought, threw back her hood, and raised her head, catching Peto's eyes, noting how his grim expression changed to one of support, of love.

Later, alone in her rooms, she watched the moon-shadows of tree branches moving on the walls of her room. She waited, afraid to sleep, afraid that if she closed her eyes the ghosts would come. Finally, exhausted, she drifted off, waking suddenly when she heard voices outside her door.

At first she was relieved to recognize them, then curious when she made out Jorani's and her brother's. The voices grew dimmer as the men walked down the hall. From the direction they'd gone, she guessed they were going to her brother's rooms, which adjoined her own.

Pulling on a dark cape, she lit her smallest lamp, bolted her door and made her way into the secret passage. There, she moved as quickly as she was able down the winding corridor to the nearest spyhole that gave access to her brother's rooms. After shading the lamp, she pulled back the cover and stole a quick peek at Mihael and Jorani. Certain she'd be seen by Jorani if she continued watching, she closed the hole and stood with her ear to it. In the silent space, she could hear nearly every word they spoke.

Jorani sat on the edge of her brother's bed. He kept his expression guarded as he watched Mihael pace. "You know it was her as well as I do," Mihael was saying. "I could overlook the rebels she killed, she had plenty of reasons for hating them. Even Dark's death would have been logical, though I can't be certain she had a hand in it. When Marishka died, I was suspicious of her, but Peto seemed so sure of what killed her. I was foolish to believe him.

"Now Greta is dead. That woman raised me and my sisters. She loved Usabet as much as she would have loved her own daughter. There's no plan of revenge in Greta's death, no reason for it at all except for the pleasure of killing."

"It may have been an accident," Jorani suggested.

Ilsabet winced. Was Jorani really betraying her so easily?

"You tell me Greta's death was an accident! If so, who was the intended victim?"

Jorani ignored the question. "Then again, Peto may be right. The poison may have been for your sister."

"Who here has the skill to kill so quickly besides you, Jorani?" Ilsabet had no trouble hearing those words, Mihael all but screamed them.

"Quiet," Jorani cautioned. "We don't need this conversation to go beyond these walls."

"Yes, we do. Peto needs to listen. He's so under her spell that he

can't understand what she's capable of."

"Someone may have been trying to kill Ilsabet to prevent a marriage between the ruling houses of Kislova and Sundell."

"That's preposterous and you know it."

"Do you really want her dead?" Jorani asked bluntly.

"I want her brought to justice before she turns her attention to me."

"She wants you restored to your rightful place as ruler of Kislova. So do I," Jorani said in a concilia-tory tone.

Though he'd kept the means by which this would happen deliberately vague, Mihael suspected the worst. He bristled and headed for the door. "So you're plotting against Peto as well."

"Plotting? It's you who sees plots everywhere."

"I was a fool to come here and speak so frankly. I've undoubtedly sealed my own death warrant, haven't I? Well, Peto will hear of this now whether he believes me or not."

His voice was so full of hate that Ilsabet risked a look into the room. She saw Jorani rush after her brother, grip his arm and swing him around. Placing both hands on Mihael's shoulders, he said, "You must let me handle this."

"You?"

Ilsabet stifled a cry as Mihael's hand fell to the hilt of the long dagger he carried. Jorani was unarmed. She had to do something.

Rushing back to her own room, she set the light beside her bed and ran into the outside hall.

On Peto's orders, guards patrolled the hallways. She ran and found the nearest one, pointing to Mihael's door. "I heard men arguing in my brother's room. It's late and after what's happened…"

"I saw him go in there with Lord Jorani."

"Someone else may have joined them," she said.

The guard nodded, cried for assistance and rushed down the hall with her behind him. At Mihael's door, he paused, not certain how to proceed. Ilsabet pushed past him and flung open the door.

In the few moments since she'd seen the beginning of the fight, Mihael had drawn the dagger. Jorani had managed to get a grip on the young man's wrist, but though he was more powerful than Mihael, anger and fear gave the youth enough strength to resist. The dagger was still in Mihael's hand, Jorani's hand around Mihael's wrist. Jorani had just managed to turn the tip of the blade toward Mihael when Ilsabet barged in.

Jorani let Mihael go. Mihael stumbled backward. Ilsabet stepped aside, and he fell against the guard's blade.

It wasn't a deep cut, one more painful than serious, but Mihael whirled and saw Ilsabet. Certain he was being attacked by a paid

assassin, he held up the knife and charged the guard.

"What's going on here!" someone bellowed.

Mihael recognized Shaul and backed off. "I'm being attacked in my own chambers," he said and pointed to the guard.

"The baroness came to me and said she'd heard arguing in here and thought someone might be attacking her brother," the guard said and went on to describe what he'd seen.

"Isn't that your own knife you're holding?" Shaul asked Mihael.

"It is," Mihael admitted.

Shaul sighed. "I'll send someone to dress your wound. I'm sure the baron will want to see all of you in the morning," he said.

"I'll stay with you until someone comes," Ilsabet said to Mihael.

"Mo! I'd rather be alone."

Ilsabet looked at Mihael as if he'd lost his mind. "Please stay with him," she said to Shaul with an apologetic smile and followed Jorani into the hall. "We'll sort this insanity out tomorrow." She spoke loudly enough for Shaul to hear, then went into her own room and bolted the door.

Jorani exchanged a few words with Shaul, keeping his side of the incident as close to the truth as he dared, and went upstairs. There he heard a tapping from the hidden room beneath his floor. As he expected, Ilsabet was waiting for him.

She had lit all the candles and her hair glowed in the light. She wore the same robe as earlier, the lace hem of the nightshirt just visible above her slippered feet. She stood in the corner of the room, flanked by the hanging web-filled globe and the glass bowl of ants, as if she were a part of some deadly tableau.

"Tomorrow morning, Mihael is probably going to accuse you of murder," Jorani told her.

"I know. I doubt Peto will listen, especially when Shaul tells Peto how Mihael was raving tonight."

"He was hardly raving," Jorani countered.

"I know what Shaul thinks he saw." She picked up one of the candles and held the flame against the side of the glass ant bowl.

"What are you doing?" Jorani asked.

"Watch." The creatures nearest the heat fled to the surface and milled around, climbing over one another, their legs and antennae flailing. She kept the heat on the side of the bowl for a few more moments, then pulled it back. The ants gradually calmed and made their way back into their nest.

"Fire seems to truly terrify them. The powder is much more potent now." She picked up the mortar and spooned a pinch of the sand into it. Wrapping a scarf around her face to keep from breathing in the drug, she stood at the table, slipped on some leather gloves and

began grinding the sand into a fine powder.

"When they are truly terrified, you need so much less to create complete hysteria in your victim."

"How did you discover it?" he asked.

"By accident when I held up a candle to get a closer look at them. I tested the powder on the blind rebel leader. He knew what I had done but had no choice. He rushed after me. I stepped aside and he went over the edge."

Jorani thought of Mihael's accusation. He doubted Ilsabet would tell the truth, but he had to ask, "Did you kill your sister?"

She looked at him, as if weighing her answer. "Do you really think I would kill my own kin?"

"Mihael does," he said. He expected her to be angry. Instead, she continued grinding the sand. "What are you going to do with it?" he asked.

She held up the pestle, showing him the grinding end coated with the powder. "Does it look like dust?"

"Quite. But it's such a little bit."

"It's more than enough." She smiled as she took a length of hollow reed from the vase in the corner. Using a folded piece of parchment, she tapped the powder into the reed. Laying it carefully on the table, she cleaned her tools, then carried the powder-filled reed to the secret door.

"What will you do with it?" he asked.

"You'll see tomorrow," she said. "Rest easy, Jorani. Peto will never believe him when he sees how Mihael acts tomorrow. Incidently, when Peto summons you, don't rush down." As she walked past him, she stood on tiptoe and kissed him lightly on the lips. Some of the dust must have leaked through her makeshift mask because he felt suddenly confused himself, and a bit dizzy. He sat at the table and stared at the spider in its hanging crystal home.

So deadly. So innocent. So like the child.

The pounding on his door woke Mihael the following morning. He'd intended to get up early and speak to Baron Peto before anyone else did, but apparently he'd misjudged the time. Still hoping to tell his side of the events before Ilsabet and Jorani met with Peto, Mihael dressed quickly, taking time only to wet down and comb his unruly hair and to brush his mustache-or what there was of it.

People had been laughing at him ever since he began growing it in the hopes of looking older, more worthy of respect. Even though it was finally thick enough to be noticeable, he still heard comments that it seemed out of place on a face that otherwise only needed a shave every three days or so.

"Compensating for youth," he repeated aloud, wondering why the taunt that he usually ignored seemed so galling this morning.

His nerves were on edge, he decided, and rightfully so. Peto wasn't likely to believe him, but then Peto was a fool for a pretty face. As he bent over to wash his face, he grimaced from the pain of last night's wound. They were all fools, including himself for letting Jorani enrage him so.

Vowing to keep his temper today, he went downstairs. When Mihael arrived, Peto and Shaul were sitting at the table and a servant was pouring tea. Peto had apparently just risen. His hair was uncombed, his feet bare. "Would you like a cup of tea while we wait for the others?" Peto asked.

"Actually, I'd like a chance to speak to you in private," Mihael replied.

"I believe this is private enough," Peto replied and placed a cup and saucer in front of him. The cup was large, the handle delicately curved. The rim was trimmed in gold and a painted black dragon curved around the inside of the cup.

Mihael was used to two meals a day; one late in the morning and the other at dusk. To him, Peto's habits seemed far too civilized. And having his lieutenant sit at his table clearly created a lack of respect. Peto was the ruler, but all too often he seemed to forget it, giving his iackeys a respect they did not deserve. For the first time, he considered that Peto's sophistication might be a handicap in Kislova. Indeed, as he thought of it further-with incredible speed-he reached the conclusion that it was amazing that Sundell had managed to defeat Kislova at all.

"I understand that you and Lord Jorani were arguing last night?" Peto began.

Mihael nodded. Now that his hair was almost dry, the locks fell forward and Mihael ran his hand through them, pushing them back. He felt dull from lack of sleep and nervous as well. Last night anger and fear had made him impetuous. Today, he wasn't certain how to approach this matter.

"Can you explain?" Peto asked.

The baron's voice was too gentle, patronizing. But Mihael was no child, and this was not his imagination. "I believe that the poison in my sister's room was left there by her. I think she killed Greta deliberately."

"And this is what you were discussing with Lord Jorani?"

The thinly veiled sarcasm in Peto's reply infuriated Mihael. He fought down the urge to beat some sense into the man. With Shaul sitting between them, Mihael would never have a chance to reach him. Mihael took a deep breath. "In part," he said, then plunged on.

"Though you refuse to consider it, I also think she killed Marishka."

"What was her reason?"

"Because Marishka was going to marry you."

"She knew the marriage would benefit your family," Peto replied.

"Her family doesn't matter," Mihael said. Though he saw the disbelief in Peto's expression, he continued. "It's revenge she wants, and she got it. You loved Marishka, and Ilsabet took her from you. If you knew my sister as well as I do, you'd know that was motive enough."

"What did Jorani say when you told him this?"

Peto didn't believe him, would never believe him.

Mihael licked his lips, then wiped them with his hand. His heart raced as if he had been running, raced faster than it had last night when he faced Jorani. "He didn't deny it. Instead he said that they both hoped that I would one day rule Kislova."

"I see. Why did you draw your blade?"

"Because he lied. They're plotting against me just as they are against you. I'll be their next victim. I can see it in how she looks at me. I told Jorani that, but he said I had to calm down, to try to be reasonable and rational. My life and yours are both at stake and he would not let me come and warn you."

As he spoke the last few words, Mihael's voice grew louder, and there was a sharp hysterical tone to it. He pushed himself to his feet and walked around the table toward Peto. Always protective of his lord, Shaul drew his sword and placed himself between the men, using the side of the blade to hold Mihael back.

Mihael pressed against it and was flung back. To Peto, both men seemed overwrought, almost dazed by strong emotion.

"He protects you," Mihael said. "But can you really be so certain about his loyalty?"

"I am," Peto answered evenly.

The servant knocked, entered. "The baroness is here. Shall I send her in?" he asked.

Peto considered speaking to her separately, then decided it was best if brother and sister confronted one another in his presence. He nodded, then told Mihael to return to his chair. The young man didn't seem to hear him, and instead stayed where he was, shaking with rage.

Ilsabet entered the room. She wore a white morning gown trimmed in pink satin ribbons and a pair of delicate white sandals. Her hair was tied back, her face washed free of all powders and colors. She looked younger than usual, calmer, and far more beautiful.

"Hello, Mihael," she said as she walked past him, taking the chair he'd abandoned. Peto noted that Mihael backed away from her, as if

she had ingested some poison that could harm him if she touched him. "You wanted to see me about what happened last night, I assume," she said to Peto.

He asked her to tell her story. She did, lying only about how she had heard the argument. She told him that she had been getting ready for bed when she heard someone fall against the wall separating their rooms. "I knew someone must be fighting in there. I was concerned for my brother so I found a guard."

"Your brother says you were less concerned about him than you were about what he might say to me."

Ilsabet frowned and looked at her brother. "I don't understand what's gotten into you, Mihael."

"All these deaths," Mihael replied. He wanted to end this once and for all. If he'd been armed, he would have fought his way past Shaul and stuck a sword in her heart. She deserved it for what she'd done. He'd undoubtedly die as a result, but it was better to go that way than to wait until she brought him down some night when his back was turned.

He thought of all the ways she could do it. His horse could spook as Marishka's had. He could drink from a glass with a poisoned rim. He could eat, could touch, could breathe, could…

His mind went round and round from one deadly scheme to another and another. As it did, his rage increased to such intensity that he wondered why Peto could not hear the beating of his heart.

"Mihael tells me you and Jorani wish to see him one day rule," Peto went on.

"Don't you?" Ilsabet replied. "Wouldn't Mihael ruling as your ally mean that you could finally return to Sun-dell? You've said often that's what you truly want."

"So I have," Peto admitted.

Why didn't Peto see what she was doing with those pale eyes and those long blond lashes that shaded them. Even the white dress had been deliberately picked to give her the guise of an innocent child.

"I'm disappointed," she said. "Unless he stops seeing plots everywhere, he'll never be able to succeed my father, and that would be the real tragedy."

"How dare you!" Mihael screamed.

Shaul moved close to him, ready to hold him back if need be. Mihael whirled. For an instant, they locked arms, almost as if they embraced, then Shaul flung him away and wiped his eyes with the back of one shaking hand. He looked at Mihael, his face flushed and ugly in its rage, then at Ilsabet-calm, serene, beautiful. She plays games with the lieutenant as well as the baron, Mihael thought. She has everyone fooled.

"A ruler has to be level-headed, Mihael," Ilsabet said patiently. "A ruler has to be prepared to fight real threats, not imaginary ones."

"This threat is very real," Mihael countered.

"In your mind," Ilsabet replied.

The tone she used, as if she were placating a small child, infuriated him more than anything she had done so far. His anger surged, and he reached across the table and gave her a hard slap on the face.

The act should have dissipated some of his anger, but instead it made it worse. He would have hit her again, harder, but Shaul wrenched him back. Mihael fought with more effort than he'd ever expended before, but Peto joined in. The two of them managed to wrestle Mihael to the floor but he continued to struggle, and they hit him until his face was bloody.

"Stop it!" Ilsabet screamed. She stood above them, her hands clasped in front of her. "You're insane, all three of you! Look, you've even opened his wound."

Peto pulled back and saw the bloodstains on the floor. "Let him go," he said to Shaul.

As Shaul obeyed, Mihael began pushing himself to his feet. At the last moment, he grabbed a knife that had fallen in the scuffle and lunged toward his sister.

Shaul flung himself between them, his own blade out to repel the attack. Mihael must have seen it, but he never stopped his forward rush.

He died quickly, struggling to his last breath against the men who tried to help him, while Ilsabet backed away as if hoping that her distance would calm him.

Jorani arrived just as Mihael died. Ilsabet gave a terrified cry and rushed into the comfort of his arms.

"You saw what he did," Peto said to her.

"I saw," Ilsabet whispered, pressing close to Jorani. "And it makes no sense."

"What happened?" Jorani asked.

"The man ran up my blade," Shaul said incredulously.

Baron Peto provided the rest of the story while Ilsabet sat beside him, her expression dull with shock.

SEVENTEEN

From the Diary of Baroness Ilsabet

I had not planned on this, so the grief I felt as I pressed against Jorani was real. I stood, swaying on my feet as they carried my brother away. Jorani's arms shook, and I knew he was as shocked as I.

Later, privately, Jorani asked me what part I had in the tragedy. I stood at his tower window, looking east as I had during my father's last campaign, his plans gone tragically awry as my own had.

"My brother keeps his hairbrush and mirror on a table close to the spy hole. While he slept, I managed to get a bit of the powder on his hairbrush. He brushed his wet hair. As it dried, the powder flaked off," I said. "I wanted Mihael raving, seeing plots all around him." I explained that I hadn't counted on the powder's strength, nor on Mihael's struggle with the lieutenant.

"The lieutenant was affected as well?" Jorani asked.

nodded. "They were both half insane when Mihael charged me."

"And Peto?"

"He has no idea what happened except that Mihael was making wild accusations. He'll think Mihael was raving."

"Mihael told me you killed Greta deliberately."

"Deliberately!" I whirled and faced him and saw a hardness in his expression that had never been there before. I knew if I told him the truth about Greta, he would betray me or have me killed. Hiding the anger I felt, I lied.

"At Argentine, I considered different ways to poison the baron. I knew I had to choose something slow so that no suspicion would fall on me. I intended to try different mixtures of the web poison on the prisoners in the dungeons until I found just the right concentration to sicken a man and kill him slowly. I never had a chance to experiment. Greta found the kerchief while she was cleaning. It was mixed in a soft molasses cookie. She probably licked her fingers and died."

"You didn't pick a very good hiding place," he said.

I told him how after her death I'd found a dead rat in my cupboard. "I think it had been gnawing on the poison. Greta must have heard it in there."

One of Jorani's books on statesmanship said that a lie is best believed when it is in close proximity to the truth. This was certainly as close as I dared to go, and he believed it. "Greta raised me. I'll always feel guilt over what happened because of my carelessness," I said. "I didn't plan her death. Don't accuse me of it."

"I would not." Jorani spoke almost offhandedly. His mind was not on the present conversation, and I knew with a second sight that he

thought of me standing in the dark shadows of the dungeons, doling out poisons, watching prisoners sicken and die.

"Were you the one responsible for the plague that cut down the prisoners?" he asked, sounding both certain of it and unapproving.

"How did *you* learn, Jorani?" I asked.

"The same way. I would go down to the dungeons with your grandfather at my side. The killings sick-ened me at first, until I hardened my heart to them."

"Enemies must be destroyed," I said.

"You are your father's daughter." He accompanied that comment with a sad shake of his head. "If you could wish for the perfect future, what would it be?"

I walked to him, placed my hands on his shoulders and tilted up my head to look at him. "That I rule Kislova with you at my right hand as you were for my father." I hesitated for a moment then added, "No, not precisely that way."

Standing on tiptoe, I kissed him. I moved quickly, kissing with what I thought must be passion. As I expected, the move caught him off guard. He'd never suspected that I might share the attraction he'd struggled with for so long. He gently pushed me back and looked down at my face-my youth, my beauty.

"No," he said, exactly as I'd expected him to. As I'd guessed, he loved me too much to play the doddering old man with the child bride.

"That future will come," I said, then laid the side of my face against his chest. "When Peto returns to Sundell, we will rule Kislova together."

"You'll let him go?" he asked. I heard the relief in his voice.

"Every time I have tried to move against him, I've brought tragedy to myself as well as those I love. In truth, the fates want him to live. As for me, I judged him by his deeds, and when I swore my allegiance, I meant it. It's time that I listen to you and forget the past. We have our lands to consider, and our own future together."

Our. We. I used the words quite deliberately. As I did, I saw him wince ever so slightly. "You could do more than that," he said.

"Wed him?" I laughed. I couldn't help it. This was exactly what I'd wanted him to suggest.

He misinterpreted my reaction, hastily going on.

"Your father desired Sundell. Your son will rule that land as well as Kislova." saw something clearly then-the most perfect vengeance. "He already desires me," I said. "I wish I could feel the same, but though I may marry him, there is no one I will ever love as much as I do you, Jorani."

I kissed him again. This time, I felt him respond.

I wish that Peto were a greater fool, someone Jorani could not respect. If so, Jorani and I would be allies. I could end my duplicity, take him completely into my confidence and reveal to him the exquisite beauty of my plan. Instead, the first kisses of my life were lies and the only man I could ever love became nothing more than a pawn for me to play.

Three days after Mihael's funeral, a trading party coming west from Sundell was attacked. Nearly all the guards and merchants were slaughtered by outlaws. The ones who escaped fled west to Nimbus Castle.

They were bathed and rested, with their wounds dressed before they met with Peto. But the royal treatment they received did nothing to dispel their anger, which seemed to be fueled more by the loss of gold and goods than that of their porters' lives.

"You must do something to end these attacks, or the alliance between our lands is meaningless." Ilsabet had quietly listened to the merchants describe the attack. Now she leaned forward, getting Peto's attention before saying, "The rebels were strong in that area. They may be leading the thugs."

"She's right," Jorani said. "If they are challenging our alliance, we need to make a strong showing."

"A united one," Ilsabet added.

Peto agreed and ordered Jorani and Shaul, the two highest-ranking officers of the Obour and Casse families, to ride out together at the head of a group of united troops.

In the days the troops were gone, Peto saw much of Ilsabet. She dined with him, sitting at a distance that managed to be both polite and cautious. He saw how she eyed his food taster, now one of the cook's children, a stout boy of twelve with a crippled arm and a placid disposition. Peto suspected he had volunteered for this position not to be useful but because the food would be better.

Peto found the thought so amusing that he requested that portions served him from the kitchen be increased by one half. From then on, he simply placed half on the second plate for the child and sent him to the far end of the table to go about his work.

His only demand was that the boy learn to eat faster. Since it seemed unwise for Peto to begin before the boy had finished, he'd begun to long for a warm slice of meat or a steaming potato.

"Do you suppose he'll need more as he gets older?" Ilsabet whispered to Peto one evening after the boy had moved out of earshot.

"Probably, but nonetheless it's good to see someone so well-matched to his chosen profession," he replied, thinking how good it

was to laugh again.

At least the news from the east was good. In the four days since the soldiers had set up camp in the border forest, they had killed half a dozen outlaws and took twice as many prisoner. Of the forty soldiers sent out, two were killed and three wounded. The wounded men were recovering well, tended by the healer and Ilsabet, who eagerly used what she had learned to make them rest easier.

She'd shown particular patience in working with the most painfully wounded of the men, sitting by his bed, feeding him poppy extract and holding his hand while the surgeons removed his gangrenous leg. Later, when Peto came down to the makeshift hospital to see how the man was doing, he found Ilsabet still sitting at the bedside, holding the man's hand though her own had been bruised by the force of the man's grip. He thought she had never looked so beautiful as she did then.

There was much to admire in her, so much that he sent a letter home to his mother explaining his feelings and asking her permission, as his surviving parent, to wed Ilsabet.

The answer came two days later, brought by the same messenger. It was not as understanding as Peto had hoped.

You know exactly what people will think, his mother wrote. Kislovans will assume you are so anxious for a marriage with their rulers that when you could not have one Obour bride, you picked another. As for myself, I speak for most of Sundell when I wonder why you cannot find a bride among your own. Come home, Peto, I'm sure if you look again you'll find someone more than suitable here.

Peto showed Ilsabet the letter almost apologetically. "I thought it best to ask her before speaking to you," he said. "But as you see…"

Ilsabet frowned and looked away to hide her disappointment. This was exactly the reaction he'd hoped for.

"… she'll have to be reminded who is ruler and why I would make such a decision. Will you come to Sundell with me as my bride?"

"Bride?" Ilsabet had her terms all prepared, but now that the matter was in the open, she wasn't certain how to proceed. "When Mihael died, I became the last Obour. Do you understand?" she said.

"If you don't marry, you'll certainly be the last."

"I made a vow. I can't give up my name."

He considered this. "Then keep it," he said.

Ilsabet went into his arms and kissed him, astonished at how much pleasure she got from the touch. Cinder other circumstances she would find him a charming man.

He pushed her to arm's length, looking at her face with the same adoration her father had. Ilsabet realized that he loved her, as well as desired her. Someday, she vowed, he would know the truth about how

Marishka had died.

"And our son will have both names?" Ilsabet asked, pressing her case gently.

"It is done in some of the northern provinces when the mother's family is of high noble blood. The move will undoubtedly cause some talk in Sundell, but once the nobles meet you they'll understand why I agree to this. Besides, it is fitting for a man who will rule both countries."

"And who will rule Kislova for our son?" It was the heart of her demand, but to say it outright would seem too mercenary. She couldn't risk that.

"I've never thought of Kislova as mine," he said. "When Mihael was alive, I considered it his. Now that he is gone, I have consulted with Lord Jorani and Lord Ruven. They tell me that there are women running estates in this land. Why can't a woman rule it?"

"Me?" Ilsabet looked no more shocked than she felt, though for a different reason. She'd expected the bargaining to be more difficult.

"I return it to you as my wedding gift."

Ilsabet closed her eyes, wanting to laugh and cry.

"Isn't it what you want?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. But Peto, it means that we'll be apart," she said, trying to sound upset by that prospect.

"Not so often. Shadow and Nimbus are close enough. And when you are with me, Lord Jorani or Ruven or whomever you wish can rule in your place."

She kissed him again.

"What kind of a wedding would you like?" he asked.

"None." She laughed at his sudden shock. "I mean I wish no feast, no dancing, no complex ceremony. I experienced all that with Marishka. I don't think I could bear to stand in her place. There would be too many memories." She touched his cheek. "I'd like to wed soon," she said.

That evening, with not even Jorani to confide in, she opened her journal and made a single entry. "It seemed to be so right to kiss him. It occurs to me I will have to make an effort to keep my wits about me when dealing with him. It would be easy to forget he is the enemy."

Two nights later, just as the sun was setting, Peto and Ilsabet exchanged their vows in a small ceremony attended only by Jorani and Shaul and a handful of Sundell officers. Afterward, they drank a toast with Sundell wine, a second from the vineyards west of Pirie. Jorani had brought his lute and played a slow wedding song. He managed to smile as he did so. The expression always looked out of place on him, so he doubted anyone noticed how strained it really

was.

While he played, he noticed that Ilsabet was staring past him, her expression so intense that he could only assume she was having second thoughts or her conscience troubled her. He moved quickly to her side and brushed his lips against her cheek, whispering quickly, "A bride should not look so pensive at her wedding ceremony."

"I was thinking of my sister," she said, her expression softening somewhat as she turned her attention back to her husband.

Jorani left the hall before the wedding couple. He'd considered carrying up a bottle of brandy to his tower but decided against it. There were safer potions to bring him sleep if sleep had been what he desired. Instead, he sought out one of the serving girls who'd given hints of being attracted to him.

They went down the fog-shrouded stairs that led to the river and bathed in its chilly waters. After they spread blankets on the stone ledge above the high-water mark, he took her in his arms.

As he kissed her, he looked up at the castle walls, at Peto's chambers, where the lamps glowed dimly.

When he woke late the following morning, Shaul was waiting for him downstairs with a dozen matters that needed immediate attention. Jorani appreciated that. In the days that followed he tried not to think of Ilsabet at all. Life became easier yet when the seemingly well-matched couple left for Sundell.

EIGHTEEN

From the Diary of Baroness Ilsabet

My entire world has changed, I have never seen such splendor. I could fill half a book with a description of just my own rooms here in Sundell. But I shall describe the journey in order.

Dusk was falling when we reached the forest near the border. An hour later, we stopped at the guardhouse where Sundell and Kislova guards served together. While Peto met briefly with his troops, I got out of the coach, saying I needed to stretch my legs and get a drink of water.

After I'd lowered the dipper into their water barrel, I tossed in a few potent grains of my powder. As I started back to the coach, the captain of the Sundell guards joined me and asked if I wanted something to eat. "Or, if you prefer, I have a bottle of red wine sent to me from my mother as a birthday gift."

"You shouldn't share that," I commented.

"I wouldn't with any of the men, but I'd be honored to pour a glass for you."

I saw possibilities in this and followed him into the guardhouse.

The wine was exquisite, and in a beautiful decanter. As I admired the cutwork in the glass, I lifted the stopper and dropped in a few more grains of the sand. As we started back to the coach, I let the remains from my kerchief fall onto the ground just inside the guardhouse door.

I pictured them sleeping on the warm summer nights, the guardhouse door open, the breeze picking up the dust, swirling it through their room. I saw their captain, tired and homesick, drinking his wine. And, of course, everyone needed water.

Things would not be peaceful there for long.

As we went on, the land slowly leveled. In the moonlight, we passed cleared fields amid the thick forest, well-tended farms, and horses roaming their ranges. It must be a peaceful land, I thought, but then prosperous lands usually are.

We stopped for the night at an inn that was the centerpiece of a small town. The public room was packed with people who had come to see their ruler and his new bride. They watched while we ate, cheered Peto when he made a toast, then began beating their feet against the wooden floor until he kissed me. I took some comfort in the barbaric display. It's good to know that they aren't entirely civilized.

They are also a large people. Their faces are uniformly round, their hair in shades from flax to chestnut. The men are heavyset, the

women buxom. Many are obese, but the food is excellent and plentiful, so I suppose that is to be expected.

We retired to a bedroom that was plush even by the standards of Nimbus Castle. Once we closed the door, the music below stopped. If they expected to hear the bedsprings squeaking, they were disappointed. It was Peto's turn to be exhausted, and we slept soundly.

Shadow Castle stood on a rise in the center of the largest city I'd ever seen. The city is called Sanguine because it was the site of a number of bloody battles as the early settlers defended their land from an invading force. The battles took place so long ago that none can recall what happened to the enemy, only that they were defeated and afterward the castle was begun.

Like Nimbus, it was built in sections and named later because of the shadow the structure threw over the buildings below it. Its towers are high, giving a view of the farms and forest that reached nearly to the Kislova border, making me understand all too well why father had intended to attack at night.

Peto had sent word ahead that we would prefer to ride in silently, so only a few of the citizens lined the road leading up to the castle. Once inside, servants grabbed my bags and carted them up the stairs. Peto and I followed.

The outer courtyard looked similar enough to my own, but the inside of the castle was radically different. I already mentioned its elegance. I'll try to describe it.

The entry hall, unlike that of Nimbus, which is huge but no more than twelve feet tall, soared up six levels. The floors were polished marble and a double marble stairway curved to the second floor. Smaller staircases climbed from either side of the main one, linking the second level with the upper floors. Open hallways decorated with carved wooden rails led to the living quarters. I followed Peto up to the third level. As I paused outside the door, I saw an old woman, richly dressed, glare at me from the floor below.

"My mother," Peto whispered; he showed me inside.

Perhaps the greatest torment to Peto would be to send him home to her, but then what we are used to can hardly be called torture.

Our rooms were everything the hallway had led me to expect. Crystal lamps threw patterns through the rooms. In winter a marble fireplace would give warmth. Now the hearth was cold and the velvet drapes were pulled back, the windows tied open to let in the air. Peto led me outside to a balcony that overlooked the town, the river and the gently rolling lands beyond it.

As I stood admiring the view, someone knocked at the door. "Come in," Peto called. A thin older man with gray hair and bright blue eyes entered. From the way Peto ran to him, kissing his cheek

and hugging him tightly, I was certain the man must be a relative. "This is Gidden, my valet," Peto said.

I had not kissed Greta since I was old enough to walk, nor had I wanted to! If this democratic affection marked the attitude of Sundell lords, I wondered how they'd managed to rule for so long. Nonetheless, Gidden was thoroughly polite as he took me through an adjoining door into my private dressing room.

Most of the gowns I had brought from Kislova were already arranged along one wall, and a pair of maids were unpacking the rest. Gidden introduced me to them. One of them, Sagra, would be my personal maid while I resided here. She looked quite a bit like the other, blond and well nourished, but was a full head taller than anyone I had met. Fates be thanked for that, otherwise I could never tell her apart from the rest.

As she bowed, I noted how she stared at me. When the men left us so that I could bathe and dress, the girl became nervous, so much so that her hands shook as she unfolded the rest of my gowns.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

She seemed to be looking at my hands. I felt her quivers of uneasiness deep in my core and immediately became thankful she, and not her more sedate companion, had been chosen to attend me. The distress was paltry compared to others I had experienced, but intense enough to give some satisfaction.

"No," she whispered. "It's only that…"

"That *whatr* I said sharply. She flinched. Delicious.

"That you're so tiny… and so very beautiful."

I laughed. I'd never considered that I would seem exotic to them.

"Would you like to bathe first or rest?" Sagra asked.

"Bathe," I said, thinking the longest ritual should be done first. In Nimbus, a half-dozen servants were required to fill my tub quickly enough that my water would not be tepid when I stepped into it. Sagra, however, opened the doors to the bathing closet and showed me the most marvelous feature of Shadow Castle. Mounted in the door above the tub were a pair of metal pipes. A metal rod hung between them. She used it to hit each of the pipes. Moments later, water began to flow from them-one pipe letting out hot, the other cold.

I hid my amazement lest she think me a barbarian. In truth I felt like one.

"Do you have a favorite scent for the water?"

I directed her to the bottle of perfume I had blended for the night I swore allegiance to Peto. A few drops were potent enough on the skin. As soon as I'd sat down in the delightfully warm water, I had her pour more than enough into the water to assure that I would be the brightest star in the night's gathering.

The scent had an effect on her as well. She stared at me, her agitation increasing.

"What is it?" I asked, not surprised to feel the sudden sharp pleasure of fear coming from her.

"I don't know. I feel so strange." Sagra gripped the side of the tub, unable to stop staring at me. If she had a suspicious nature, she might have been wondering if I'd performed some sorcery on her. I doubt it. She seemed far too embarrassed.

The water was getting deep. "How do we stop it?" I asked.

She shook her head to clear it, then beat on the cold pipe. It stopped. I let the hot run a bit longer, then had her stop it as well. As I leaned back, letting Sagra dry and brush my hair, I began to understand why Peto had been so homesick. One could easily become attached to these luxuries.

Exhausted, I fell asleep in the warm water. Occasionally, dimly, I felt Sagra's hand brush against my foot as she let out a bit of the water, heard her beat on the pipe to send more hot.

I had not brought everything I owned to Sundell, but I did bring the best. I admit that I deliberately chose to take the dresses Peto had ordered for my sister.

That night, I wore the blue-and-gold one, not just because he would think of Marishka when he saw me in it, but also because they were Kislova's colors. It was right that I should wear them tonight. Besides, this was the finest gown I owned.

But nothing could prepare me for the wealth and fashion displayed in Shadow Castle's ballroom that evening. By Kislovan standards, my gown was exquisitely designed and sewn, trimmed in the most delicate hand-crocheted lace. Here it could not compete with the colors and fabrics-and gems! — that decked the bodies of the Sundell women.

One of the women wore a diaphanous gown of pale blue silk that seemed to change color when viewed from different angles. Another had a low-cut bodice and flowing skirts edged with peacock feathers.

I could go on, but to do so would make me sound too much like Marishka. In truth, I did not feel awed by the beauty, only angry that I had not been warned what to expect. My status as Peto's bride made me the center of attention. I danced, sat, dined, and spoke as regally as possible. I think I would have made a good impression even without my perfume. With it on, everyone fawned over me.

Everyone, that is, but Peto's mother. The few words she spoke to me in public were barely civil. When I requested a few moments with her privately, she declined and made it seem as if my request to clear the air was a display of despicable manners.

"You could have warned me what to expect," I said to Peto that

night in our rooms. I hid my fury under a sorrowful facade. "I looked tattered. I felt slighted."

"You looked beautiful. As for my mother, she had a bride all picked for me. When the girl and I met one another, we discovered we had nothing in common save a mutual dislike for arranged marriages. Mother's been sulking ever since. You could be ruler from the mountains to the sea, and she would still ignore you."

"I can't live with her," I said, hoping to plant the seeds for an excuse to go home as soon as possible.

"She'll come around. Give her time." won't be here long enough for that. I've already made sure of it.

"She'll come around faster if I'm properly dressed."

"Send for the seamstresses in the morning," he replied. When he kissed me, I responded, then requested time to bathe and change. I asked Sagra to leave as well.

As soon as she had gone, I unlocked my jewel box and pulled from it a tiny vial filled with the amber-colored liquid that I'd gotten from Rilca at Argentine. I want no child, at least not until the time is right.

Arcus, captain of the Sundell guards in the border forest, had been keeping a close eye on the Kislovan men for the last few days. One of their guards had been spending a great deal of time traveling between the shadows of the woods and the guardhouse.

When questioned, the man said he felt sick and needed to use the trench toilets they'd dug there.

Nonetheless, Arcus remained suspicious. The Kislovan men were whispering together, plotting against him, probably in league with the outlaws. As for the last, they were out there in the woods, just waiting for a moment of weakness before attacking.

He doubled the number of guards at night, but the Kislovan plotting continued. Little wonder, he thought, now that Peto was gone, taking with him the last of the Obours. He didn't blame the baron-the woman was such a pretty little thing-but now there was no one to rule these people. It wouldn't be long before open rebellion began.

Tempers flared suddenly: a Kislovan had to be pulled off a Sundell soldier after he'd been accused of cheating at cards; a pilgrim taking a trip to see Sagesse at Tygelt had been beaten by the Kislovan guards; and a thousand trifling tiffs.

When Arcus tried to consider what had changed the tempers in this place, all he could focus on was the duplicity of the Kislovan men. They were angry and jealous of the Sundell men who had defeated them. The Kislovans should have died in the battle. Now they would

have to die before they turned on him. He stayed awake, drinking wine while the others not on duty slept. Outside, he could hear the guards. Of the three on duty, two were Kislovan. They whispered to one another. More plots. Too many.

He unsheathed his dagger, hid it under his cloak, and went outside. "I thought I heard someone moving in the brush," he said.

"We'll go and look," the Sundell soldier said.

"No. I'll do it." He pointed to the Kislovan who'd been spending so much time in the forest and asked him to follow.

Just out of sight of the guardhouse, he crouched down and examined the dust. "Look what I found."

"I don't know how you can see a thing in this light," the soldier grumbled, but crouched beside him. As he did, Arcus stabbed upward with the knife, catching him in the throat. The man fell without a sound. Arcus pulled out the man's knife, nicked his own arm with it and pressed it into the dead man's hand.

Rushing back to the guardhouse with blood falling from his arm and the bloody knife in his hand, he advanced on the remaining Kislovan guard. "Your partner attacked me," he said.

The young man, a recent recruit called Lajo, shook his head and backed toward the guardhouse door. "Stop him before he warns the others," Arcus said.

The Sundell guard moved quickly, blocking the man's retreat.

The soldier halted. "I didn't do anything," Lajo said, then saw the knife Arcus held, the blood staining it almost to the hilt, glinting in the pale moonlight. "I didn't," he repeated and fled down the road, his boots raising a cloud of dust as he ran.

Lajo ran as far as he was able, then stopped to catch his breath and listen for pursuers. He heard nothing but the sounds of frogs and insects, the wind rustling through the trees. Keeping to the shadows of the trees, constantly alert for someone seeking him, he slowly made his way back down the road.

The guardhouse door was open. A flickering light inside illuminated the smoke pouring from it. As he moved closer, he saw that the walls and ceiling were on fire. Bodies lay on the ground outside the door; more were just inside it. Some were still alive when he reached the door, but the captain was killing them quickly, stabbing down, oblivious to the flames moving around him.

As Lajo stood, bathed in the smoky light, Arcus looked up at him. With a bellow of rage, he bolted forward. Lajo fled again as the walls and ceiling fell in. He ran, hearing the captain's terrified screams.

Lajo made the trip to Nimbus Castle in record time, then refused to speak to anyone but Lord Jorani personally. He had such fear of Sundell uniforms that Jorani asked Shaul to wear a Kislovan cloak

before they questioned Lajo.

An hour later, after they'd listened to his tale of the captain's madness and the slaughter at the guardhouse, they sent out a second group of men to verify his story. Most of the bodies were badly burned. Jorani examined them, but could find no clue as to why they had killed one another.

"It's the isolation," Shaul suggested. "We should rotate the duty more often."

"A good idea," Jorani agreed, "but I think it's time for Baron Peto to cut short his honeymoon."

Five Sundell guards rode to the border. One continued on with a message for Peto. The rest followed JoranFs odd orders and set up a new camp a few hundred yards from the old one.

From the Diary of Baroness Ilsabet

I toured Shadow Castle from top to bottom. I've talked to the laborers who put in the baths and arranged to have them go to Nimbus and make changes there. I visited the merchants' shops and ordered crystal lamps and silverplate. Nimbus Castle will be as beautiful as Shadow, I'll see to it.

I've spent the rest of my time in the library. I have never seen so many books. It's almost as if the hundreds of volumes hold all the wisdom of the world. I think often of Jorani as I study the volumes on philosophy, government and botany, and wish he were here to share them with me.

This also seems to be the one place in the castle where Peto's mother is loathe to go, though I see her far too often elsewhere.

Yesterday, she confessed that the dusty volumes make her sneeze, and the bright light of the eastern windows gives her a headache. Her eyes aren't healthy, so I suspect that reading itself pains her. And she is viciously frank. She said that her main concern about me is that I might be too slender in the hips to bear children. I assured her that my mother was just as narrow and had three with no difficulty.

"And were your siblings as tiny as you?" she asked.

described them both as tall and strong, my brother a giant like my father. I believe she guessed I was lying, but did not say so. If I were planning on staying for any length of time, I'd have to think of some way of dealing with her. Instead, I bite my tongue and think that it will not be long before I'm home again.

We had this conversation while the seamstresses were doing the final fittings for my new gowns. I would have been content with two, but Peto's mother, whom I've come to call Widow Casse, ordered six, each more ornate than the last, and demanded that they be done as quickly as possible. I've never worried about my clothing before, but if

I am to rule Kislova, I should dress like a ruler. I admit I found the procedure of holding bolts of cloth to my face interesting. I picked two fabrics-one a deep burgundy satin, the other a perfect shade of silver. With the fabric draped across my body I feel like an ice princess, cold and beautiful.

This morning, Peto brought me a gift, a pair of crystal earrings and a single crystal snowflake on a silver chain. "I thought how beautiful it would look against the silver cloth," he said after I'd opened it.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him as Marishka would have done. But I could not help thinking that by winning my love he flatters himself. Ah, he is in for such an awakening.

I'd just put the jewelry away when we were interrupted by a pounding on the door. In a palace where servants were unflinchingly polite, the urgency of the sound made Peto wary.

As soon as he unlocked the door, I could see that the news wasn't good. We went downstairs and met the guard who had come from Nimbus Castle.

"Jorani is right," I said after the man had detailed the unrest the killing had caused. "One of us must be there. I have to go."

Peto nodded. I could see how much he wanted to go back with me, but Sundell custom made that impossible. He had to remain in Sundell for the funeral of his fallen soldiers. I sat with him for the next few hours, holding his hand, feeling his rage and pain.

My gowns were finished by nightfall. I put on the silver one and the crystal jewelry and went into the bedroom I shared with my husband. As I walked toward the bed, I saw my reflection in a full-length mirror. The moonlight had turned my hair to silver and the gown seemed to flow like water over my body. I had never felt so cold, or so beautiful as I turned to Peto and held out my arms.

NINETEEN

Jorani could never understand madness, yet now it seemed to be all around him. Word of the killings at the border guardhouse rolled like a deadly tidal wave through the castle, then Pirie, then all of Kislova. The fact that six of the dead were from Sun-dell was ignored. The fact that the Kislovan soldiers had been new recruits and one had fought for the rebels before the invasion seemed to be all that anyone considered. Suddenly, Baron Peto was not a savior but a tyrant, more hated than Janosk, who had at least been one of their own.

Nobles of various Kislovan estates were waiting for Ilsabet at Nimbus Castle. She wore the silver gown, the crystal jewelry, the matching silver shoes. When she stepped from the carriage, pale hair in delicate ringlets over her back, Lord Ruven took her hand and escorted her into the great hall, past the assembly, to the seat of honor her father had once occupied.

Jorani waited beside it, and as she climbed the stairs, he thought how right it was that Janosk's most able child should finally sit in his place.

The silence that greeted her arrival was the last for hours. Though Ilsabet was undoubtedly exhausted from the long journey, she listened carefully as nobles gave their opinions on what should be done. Most wanted to continue the alliance with Sundell-as if anyone had a choice in the matter-which had proven so beneficial to the country. A few suggested ways of appeasing the peasants. One old lord, a staunch supporter of Janosk, was inexplicably in favor of invading Sundell.

"They'd hardly expect such a move. And we'd have the support of the people, that's for sure," he said.

Ilsabet listened politely to the man, then explained to him that Sundell was far too strong for the remnants of the Kislovan army. "Besides, the work of one insane officer cannot be allowed to undo what has become an economically advantageous alliance."

Jorani was surprised at his relief. Had he really thought she would do something foolish out of revenge? As he listened to her propose imprisonment for those speaking against the occupation and execution for anyone who took up arms against Sundell, he realized she was as harsh a ruler as her father had been. With a pang of regret, he also decided she might have fallen in love with her husband.

When they were alone in her chambers, she dispelled that last thought by throwing her arms around him and kissing him. "I thought of you every day," she said and moved away from him. The silver fabric of her gown caught the light, and as she walked toward the window, it seemed to glow.

"Do you care for Peto at all?" he asked.

She shook her head. "But I've learned to lie so perfectly," she answered. "And I'm pleased I went there. I've discovered so much." She told him of the plans she'd made for the castle, then took him to her room where servants had uncrated the books she'd borrowed and piled them on her reading table.

Given her interests, she'd chosen well, Jorani noted. There were neatly written and illustrated volumes on plants of the region, on the uses of molds and chemicals, on the spread and treatment of disease.

"They're a strange people," she said. "So many of the books were covered with dust or crumbling with age. I was in awe of the knowledge they ignored. I've already read some of the ones I borrowed, but I wanted to share them with you. And just before I left, I discovered this behind a shelf of books. I doubt anyone knew it was there." She held out a slim pile of pages, crudely bound.

He sat at the table and opened it. The writing was faded to a pale brown, almost unreadable against the yellowed pages. He read the first page slowly, then looked up at her with concern. "Don't keep this, Ilsa-bet. This does not deal with healing, nor even with poisons. This is sorcery, black and terrible. It also mentions a curse connected with the potion's use."

"It describes how to raise the dead. If you had fallen, wouldn't you want me to use such a thing on you?"

"Never! Don't even think of ft." If there had been a fire in the hearth, he would have flung the volume into it, half expecting it not to bum.

"I've read nearly all of it already," she lied. "I never forget what I learn. If you don't want me to share the knowledge contained here, I'll bum the book as soon as I'm finished."

"No," he said. "I won't destroy such knowledge, though I'll never use it." As he spoke, he knew this was a decision he would one day regret.

When Jorani turned to leave, she gripped his arm and drew him inside, kissing him again, then going to the table, filling a pair of crystal goblets. "I told you we would rule together." She handed him a glass.

He took it, sipped it, thinking there was something inevitable and tragic about the love he felt for her. Nonetheless, he stayed.

Beside him in bed, Usabet thought about the amber potion she had deliberately stopped taking. The time for a child had come. No heir of Peto's

would rule Kislova or Sundell. Someday Peto would know the truth of that as well.

Later that night, she dreamt of her ghosts-Mar-ishka with her

white wolf, Dark with the girl she'd seen in the camp, the rebels she'd poisoned in the dungeon, even the soldiers in the guardhouse. They were together, moving toward her across the mist-covered Arvid River, up the narrow winding staircase that led to the room where she lay, tossing in the nightmare.

She screamed and tried to fling off the covers and run from them, but the mists were all around the bed, the room. She was lost in them, lost in the horror of what she had done. She forced herself awake and with a broken cry reached across the bed for Jorani. He had gone. She was alone, and the dreams had somehow followed her into the waking world. She saw the shifting forms of her victims floating through the dark room, their white hands reaching out to brush her face.

She cringed back, but the ghost of Marishka moved closer to plant a frigid kiss on Ilsabet's cheek. "You must not destroy him, Sister," she whispered, "or you will destroy yourself, as well."

Pulling the covers over her face, Ilsabet lay in the bed, her heart pounding, her body shaking, terrified like the child she almost was.

Emory's father had been a rebel, captured and executed in the last days of the fighting. After the failed invasion and the fall of Janosk, Emory had done his best to take his father's place around the farm, but found it impossible. Before, he had managed the flocks in the hills south of Pirie while his father and younger brother tended the barn and the fields. Now Emory wished his family were larger.

Even a little sister would be welcome to help with spring planting.

By spring, he conceded to his mother and took on a Kislovan soldier. The man worked as diligently for the family as he had for Janosk, and a few months after arriving, married Emory's mother. In time, Emory saw the soldier as just a man, worthy of respect, and abandoned his hatred for his mother's sake.

Then came the guardhouse massacre, where a boyhood friend of Emory's was slaughtered by a Sundell officer. Some said the officer had gone mad, others that the murdered soldiers had stumbled onto a Sundell plot and were killed to keep them silent.

Emory wasn't certain which theory he believed, but he finally had an outlet for his anguish and hate. He would slip from the house at night and meet his comrades at an outlying farm, where they would sit and talk of independence from Sundell.

Emory knew it was only a matter of time before their plots were discovered. When he heard the soldiers riding toward Pirie, he woke his brother. They grabbed scythes and ran to the neighbors' houses, rousing their friends. The group of four fanned out, moving through the little town, waking comrades, who armed themselves with

whatever was handy. If they were to be taken, they'd go down fighting.

They assembled on the docks. The few tiny fishing boats behind them provided a ready means of escape, and the river mists were thick enough to hide their flight.

They waited silently as the sounds of the patrol's horses grew louder, until they saw the soldiers ride out of the mists.

Shaul held up his hand, a signal for the others to stop, and stared down at Emory and the rest of the band. "Catch anything?" he asked.

"We haven't gone out yet," someone replied. A few of the men chuckled. They'd expected to be attacked, not to bandy lies with the enemy.

"We're on our way to the border guards. If any of you know the men, I'd be happy to take them a message," Shaul said.

The offer deflated nearly everyone. But in the back of the crowd someone, probably from the group who'd left the tavern, called out loudly, "Tell them to go home. We don't serve Sundell."

A few of the men hooted.

Shaul turned his horse toward the crowd and advanced. Someone stabbed with a pitchfork. The horse reared and in an instant the battle was on.

The townsfolk were no match for the well-armed soldiers, and the battle turned into a rout. As Emory dragged a wounded comrade toward a boat, soldiers pulled him back and wrestled him to the ground.

That was all he remembered until he woke, tied and tossed with prisoners and wounded alike into the back of a cart rolling slowly down the road to Nimbus Castle. In the dim light of the cart's lamp, he saw that the man he'd been helping lay beside him, his hands also tied behind his back. The man's shoulder wound had opened and his shirt and Emory's were soaked with blood.

"Help him please," Emory called to one of the Sundell soldiers. The man moved ahead in the line without a word.

A lamp flared in a cottage on the edge of town. Emory raised his head and saw the man's father standing in the door, the worried frown on his face accentuated by lamplight.

"Leka is here," Emory cried out. "He's been…"

At the first sound, the soldier returned, kicking Emory hard on the side of his head. He lay back and listened to Leka's moans, his labored breaths, until finally, mercifully, Leka trembled as death touched him and the terrible noises stopped.

By then, the walls of Nimbus Castle were rising above the mists. They rode through the fog on the narrow peninsula. Emory raised his head enough to see the doors swing open like the great jaws of some

half-formed misty beast, swallowing them all as they rode inside.

Emory got only a glimpse of the castle before he was pulled out of the cart and dragged to the dungeons. He heard two other boys from Pirie talking in an adjoining cell. He wanted to call to them, to tell them he was all right, but he'd become too frightened to say a word. Rats, his father used to say, loved the scent of blood, and his shirt was soaked with it. He pulled it off, wiped the blood from his body, then flung the dirty cloth through the bars of his cell. With his back to a corner, his knees tight against his chest, he tried to sleep.

Jorani had left Ilsabet's room just after midnight and returned to his tower rooms. He wanted no scandal, no hint that they were anything but an aged teacher and his apt pupil. He'd just dozed off, thoughts full of her, when a soft knock at the door roused him.

"Come in," he called, and a stableboy entered.

The youth wiped sleep from his own eyes, then said, "I was told not to rouse the house, but to come directly to you and say that four of the soldiers have returned. They bring two of their own wounded and three prisoners. Lieutenant Shaul wishes to speak to you."

"I'll inform the baroness," he said.

Kashi already had. Jorani found Ilsabet in the kitchen, sitting with the healers as the wounded soldiers had their cuts bathed and wrapped.

Without kohl and rouge, her features seemed younger, more delicate. What was I thinking last night, he wondered, then realized ruefully that he'd hardly been thinking at all.

Shaul drew Jorani aside and described how the prisoners had been captured, adding that he believed the men on the dock were acting in self-defense when the clash occurred. "One Sundell soldier is dead, along with two men from the village," he concluded. "It's a serious matter, but the prisoners are scarcely more than children. I request that you take their age into account when you decide their punishment."

"I'll discuss it with the baroness." Jorani returned to where Ilsabet was sitting, whispered a few words to her, then asked, "Do you want to see the prisoners?"

She nodded and followed him to the dungeons, her hard-soled slippers making sharp clicks on the damp stone stairs.

The dank lower levels of the castle were as familiar to her as the upper floors. She could have walked these passages in total darkness, yet she listened dutifully as Shaul warned her about sinkholes, places where the hall narrowed, where the next set of steps were, where the passage became treacherously slippery.

The two prisoners that shared a cell were a little older than

Ilsabet. The bravado had left them in the last hours, and they were more than willing to petition for their ruler's mercy. The third and youngest prisoner did not move when they came to his cell. Though his eyes glowed with a fierce pride, his face was a mask of fear, both emotions so intense that either might underlie his refusal to come forward and greet the baroness.

"The man beside him in the cart died on the way to the castle, Baroness," Shaul said. "This one hasn't moved from that place since we brought him here."

Ilsabet took the torch from the soldier and thrust it through the bars. The cell, with its oozing walls and slimy floors, looked all the worse in the firelight.

"Why won't you come forward?" she asked.

"The rats," he whispered.

"There are no rats here," she replied. "Come. Bow."

He stretched out his legs and stood, walking toward her. Something in his expression reminded her of Dark, enough that she pulled the torch back and returned it to a servant. "I'll bow to Kislova but never to SundelL"

"I am Kislova."

He lowered his eyes and bowed his head more out of acceptance of her station than obedience. "My name is Emory," he said.

"Why did you attack the patrol, Emory?" she asked.

"We thought they were coming to arrest us. It happened often even before the revolt."

Ilsabet looked to Jorani. "It's true," Jorani said. "What do you want to do with these three?"

Jorani had expected that the boy had already made his death certain. However, Ilsabet surprised him. "Let the other two go. This one has the mark of a leader. I want him kept in the castle for a while." She saw the look of horror on Emory's face. Amused by it, she smiled. "Somewhere secure, but more comfortable, someplace where there are no rats, where we can sit and talk and think of ways to bring quiet to this land."

"I'd… I'd scarcely have any ideas, Baroness," Emory stammered, still hoping to leave with the others.

"Even so, I want you to stay. Don't worry, I'm going to give you my sister's rooms. Tonight, bathe and rest. Tomorrow, we'll meet." She left him, giving orders to the guards.

As soon as she was gone, they unlocked Emory's cell and escorted him upstairs. He didn't feel quite like a prisoner any longer, but he wasn't a guest, either.

TWENTY

The room Emory occupied was as large as his family's cottage. The bed could have held the family as well. As he stood, surrounded by opulence but wearing ripped and dirty clothing and covered with bruises and cuts, servants brought in a tub and began filling it with hot water.

When someone tried to help him take off his clothing, he blushed and asked the servants to leave. They did, sliding a bar across the door. Well, he could hardly be expected to stay otherwise.

The water felt scalding at first, then deliciously warm. The blood caked to his skin soaked off in the soapy water. He scrubbed, then laid his head against a rolled towel on the side of the tub and closed his eyes. Later, when he found himself dozing off, he got out of the tub and, with little energy left, dried off and slipped between the starched sheets.

He woke with no idea of the time. While he'd slept, however, the servants had removed the tub and laid clean clothes across the end of his bed. It hardly surprised him that he'd slept through the sound. At home, with so many sharing such a small space, he'd had to learn to sleep through anything.

Breakfast came soon after he dressed, leading him to wonder if he were being watched. He'd just started his second helping of noodles and eggs when Jorani and the baroness joined him. They sat together, sharing tea out of cups far too delicate for Emory's hands, and discussed the mood in Pirie.

Emory could tell them nothing new. Not knowing why he was here made him nervous, and when discussion became strained, they left him.

After he'd gone to bed that evening, he heard someone call his name. He opened his eyes and saw the baroness standing beside his bed, a brass lamp in hand. "Come talk with me a while."

The baroness led Emory down the twisting passage, then through the main castle entrance hall. The chamber was as big as his village square, the tapestries more beautiful than any he had seen for sale in the best Pirie shops. The stairs curved gracefully up, giving him glimpses of artwork, carvings.

It was an incredible opportunity, yet if he'd had any idea which way led to freedom, he'd have bolted. Instead, he kept his composure as best he could.

He joined her at a table beneath a bank of windows. She pulled open the shutters, and in the moonlight he could see the mists on the river below him, the hills rising on the bank.

The baroness wore a simple black gown. Her hair was combed back and her face seemed pale in the dim light. It seemed she was trying to put him at ease, and he did his best to act as if he were.

She handed him a glass of wine. His fingers brushed hers as he took it. She watched intently as he sipped it. Something about the brilliance in her eyes, or the potency of the wine made him dizzy. He put down the glass and rubbed his forehead. The feeling passed.

They talked for another hour. In time he began to speak frankly about the poverty in the village, the desire for peace, and the growing distrust of Sundell.

"Now you've married Baron Peto. What are we to think?" he asked.

"That perhaps someday, it will be a Kislovan lord ruling both lands for the benefit of all of us." She stood, walked to the door. "You look tired," she said. "We'll speak later."

Emory was sorry to return to his room, but she was right. He still felt as exhausted as he had the night before, with barely enough energy to return to the bed.

He woke with difficulty when a servant brought his evening meal. As he ate, he managed to throw off the lethargy so that by the time the baroness and Lord Jorani joined him, he was wide awake.

This time the baroness spoke of Shadow Castle. He had thought this place magnificent but apparently it was no more than a crude outpost by comparison to its neighbor. She described the changes she intended to make, the artisans she would be employing from Pirie and the rest of Kislova. When she began discussing carpentry, he beamed: that had been his stepfather's occupation.

They took him to the wharf behind the castle, where Ilsabet explained how she intended to add a pair of docks to increase the river trade to the castle and surrounding countryside.

"The work will cost a lot of money," Emory said.

Ilsabet smiled. "My husband will pay for it."

The glare of the sun on the water made Emory's head pound. He winced and leaned against Jorani for support. "I'm sorry. I think I got a harder kick to the head than I thought," he said apologetically.

Servants helped him to his room. Jorani stayed with him a while, asking how he felt, then left him.

"Will he be all right?" Ilsabet asked.

"I think so. We can probably send him home in a day or two. Once he tells everyone about your plans for the castle, they'll think twice before continuing the foolish resistance to Sundell." He walked down the hall with her, stopping outside her door. "When you write your husband, tell him I believe that in a few week's time everything will be quiet here."

"A bittersweet victory since it means that Peto will come back to me," she said and touched his cheek.

Inside her room, she barred her door, as was her habit, and sat at her table. There she opened her journal and began to write.

I've determined the concentration of web needed to produce illness rather than coma or death. It astonishes and heartens me to realize Jorani has no inkling of what I did, even though he was there when I served it to the boy. If one who knows of the poison can't detect its presence, no Sundell healer will.

Tonight in private, I intend to administer another, smaller dose to the boy. I need to see if the tiny bit more will sicken him again, put him into a coma, or kill him. If the latter happens, I'll make use of it since I've also mixed the potion that is supposed to revive the dead.

I wonder if the formula will work, and what the curse associated with it might be. I wish I could be more open about my work, but Jorani makes that impossible. I've decided it would be wise for him to be elsewhere for a time while I test all the new things I've learned.

She put the journal aside and took out a sheet of parchment. Dipping her quill into the ink, she thought a moment and began to write.

Dearest husband,

It was a long and sad ride back to Nimbus Cas-tie, but a necessary one. We've arrested three men for attacking Sundell troops. Shaul believes they were more frightened than dangerous. Given their youth, I intend to be merciful but not overly so.

I also want to share my good news. I think we're going to have a child. Think of it, Peto, an heir for both our lands. I know it's too early to be sure, but I have many of the first signs. If this news turns out to be only wishful thinking, I know we'll be together soon to try again. In the meantime, we have the duties of our lands to keep us apart.

So far, things go well here, though I wish the people would look to me rather than Jorani for advice. Jorani supports me, but they are so used to him that it is difficult for me to take charge. Though it pains me to mention it, he is feared in this land; it is difficult for me to pacify the people with him here, and because of our years together I don't want him to know I need him well away. I'm hoping you can think of some reason for him to leave-either for Argentine or Shadow Castle-and word the request as if it were your idea. It only need be for a few months at most; then I want him back, for I have always valued his advice.

With the most important news out of the way, she went on about more trivial matters, mentioning the primitive conditions at Nimbus Castle and the changes she hoped to make. Perhaps she should not have written him so quickly; the news might make him rush to her

side. Nonetheless, it was better for him to think she was with child early rather than write later when she was certain. Better he be disappointed than suspicious. She also requested that he ask Sagra to come to Nimbus Castle. "Now that Greta is gone, I have no one whose company I enjoy as well," Ilsabet wrote. "But please ask her if she wishes to come. She may be a bondwoman, but we will get along much better if she has a choice."

Now that the awe of being in this bed, this room, and inside the castle walls had worn off, Emory considered the reasons for his being here and decided he didn't like them.

Jorani and the servants were far too kind, too ready with answers he wanted to hear. He was also beginning to doubt he would be released, especially now that he was ill. He'd just begun wondering if Jorani had done something to him when servants carried in his breakfast and a second plate for the baroness.

Her hair, falling loose over her shoulders, was white against the deep blue of her gown. As they ate, he could not help noticing her perfectly oval eyes, the delicate hands that covered her mouth each time she laughed.

She did not seem to be thinking of her impression on him. Nonetheless, she often watched him so intently that he began to wonder what she expected of him. When she poured him a glass of cider, he looked down at it without drinking.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"I fear Lord Jorani."

She frowned, then broke into laughter. "Ah, poisons! No, we would not go to such trouble if we meant to kill you," she said.

"To experiment?"

"Jorani outgrew that need long ago." She sipped from her own glass, then held it out. "If you're concerned about the cider, drink mine."

He flushed. "No," he said and picked up his glass. He'd taken no more than a sip when the dizziness he'd felt yesterday returned. This time his hand went numb and the goblet fell, splattering the juice across the brocade tablecloth.

"Baroness," he whispered, staring at her in horror as a triumphant smile grew on her thin lips.

"Jorani has no need to experiment. I do," she said.

As he fell backward, he opened his mouth to scream, but she was beside him in an instant, her hand covering it so even the croak that managed to escape his throat was muffled. In a moment, he stopped struggling and lay faceup on the floor, his eyes raised toward the ceiling, though they focused on nothing.

"Your life depends on your answers," Ilsabet said. "Try to blink."

Though it took effort, he did as she asked.

"Try to move."

His limbs were dead, save for his eyes, which blinked furiously until even that stopped. He feared going blind, losing one of the last holds he had on the world. Her lips moved close to his face. He could smell her perfume as she said, "I'm going to kill you now. It will be painful but brief.

Though he could not move, his fear made him tremble. She raised his head, laying it across her knees. He heard her sigh of pleasure, her soft laugh. Then her hands covered his mouth, pinched his nose shut. Paralyzed, he could do nothing as his lungs began to fight for air.

She broke her promise, letting in a bit of air each time he lost consciousness until finally his body was unable to fight the inevitable any longer, and he died.

His spirit floated in a soft darkness that seemed neither frightening nor comforting. He had not been judged, he thought, and wondered what the fates would decide for him. As beams of light, bright and beautiful, began cutting through the dark veil around him, he felt warmth, life, and found himself pulled back into his body. He opened his eyes and cried out at the pain of the bright sunlight.

"So quickly," she whispered.

He tried to sit up. Pain coursed through him-an agony that made him cry out. She had killed him, then brought him back from the dead. Only the fates had that sort of power. He looked up at her, entranced by the beauty he seemed to notice for the first time. His first act when he was able to move was to kiss her hand. Then abruptly he dropped it. He seemed bewildered, as if the knowledge of what she had done had vanished as dreams do upon awakening.

"Now you do as I command," she said.

His expression did not change when she said those words, as if he had lost all his own will.

Seeming to fear that his sudden adulation would be suspect, the baroness gave Emory a dozen silver coins and a final command. He was to return to Pirie, tell everyone her plans for Kislova, and come back to her in a month to discuss what he'd learned.

She watched him go, walking swiftly down the narrow peninsula road and up the cliff road toward the village. An hour ago he'd been dead. She'd brought him back.

What price would the fates demand for such power?

The thought sobered her, but she put it from her mind and sought out Jorani, who was in his tower room writing letters for Sundell.

"Tell Peto I let the boy go," she told him. "He looked well enough

and when he asked it seemed the right moment." She told him what she asked Emory to do.

"It's good that he's gone back because the two we let go earlier apparently told everyone Emory was our hostage. This morning five of his friends managed to separate one of the Sundell guards from the rest of his patrol and beat him nearly to death before they were overcome. We've locked them up. Since the guard will most likely die, I hardly think we can let them go."

"You're right. What happened before could be seen as a misunderstanding. This, on the other hand, is sedition. Separate the men into individual cells. Let them sit in the darkness and rot until the town itself petitions for their release. That's the time to show mercy if we choose to."

She left him to his letters. Later, in a sharp slanted script that showed her excitement, she described what she'd done.

From the Diary of Baroness Ilsabet

As the boy clutched his neck and fell, I watched him, feeling what he felt, the delight his pain gave me.

I knelt beside him and told him I would kill him, intending to be swift. But when I touched him and felt him shiver like some helpless wild creature in my hands, something came over me, an excitement I did not understand. I played with him, bringing him to the edge of death a dozen times, then reviving him. It seemed I could feel his spirit pleading for release, begging me, then hating me for the pain, the death.

And the first thing he did when he could move was grasp my hand as if he were not worthy to touch me, and kiss it. What a magnificently perfect curse-to

Elmme Berqstrom kill a man and make him your slave. I find it ironic that such power should come from a book abandoned and forgotten in Sundell!

Now that I know the amount of web necessary to induce a coma, I'll begin to perfect the amount. After I left Jorani, I went down to the dungeons, stood in the darkness and studied our new prisoners. One seems to be the approximate size and age of my husband. I'll use him as I used the boy until I have exactly the proper dosage to slowly destroy Peto.

And after my child is born, I'll be ready. I wait anxiously for that moment.

"Marishka's warnings be damned," she whispered aloud as she put away her book.

TWENTY-ONE

Emory's joyful rush toward his village quickly slowed to an unsteady walk. The headache that had pounded so mercilessly yesterday returned as the sun moved higher in the sky and beat down on his bare head. He pulled off the shirt they had given him at the castle, held it over his head, and took refuge in a grove of trees. Late in the day, he continued home.

He stumbled through the door and into his mother's arms. "We thought you were dead," she said, joyfully running her hands over his face, studying his back and chest, clucking at the bruises he'd gotten in the fight.

"I was well treated," he said. "And when I asked to leave, the baroness let me go."

"She let you?" his mother asked incredulously.

"She treated me like a guest. She gave me a message to relay to the village, but I can't talk to anyone now. I'm too tired."

His mother brought him water and made him lie down. He slept through the night and late into the following afternoon, when the sparse trees threw thin shadows across the land and his stepfather and brother came home from the fields. He sat at the table with them and ate the food his mother had prepared only because it would concern her if he did not. Actually he had no appetite, but that hardly surprised him. He'd eaten so well in the last few days.

When Erich, his stepfather, served Baron Janosk, he'd lived in the castle in the barracks and lower halls. Emory, on the other hand, could describe the rooms of state, and his family listened intently. As Emory spoke, he discovered broad gaps in his memory, especially in the last few hours before his release, but hid his concern as best he could.

When he explained the baroness's request that he tell others about her plans for Nimbus, his brother Arman asked, "Should we walk to town with you?"

"I'd like to walk there alone," Emory said. "I have to clear the cobwebs from my head."

"It's almost dark. You shouldn't go alone. I'll come along, and I won't say a word," Arman said.

Of course, he wouldn't keep his promise. Arman never stayed quiet for more than a few minutes, Emory knew, but his chatter was harmless and easily ignored.

Arman's physical presence was harder to deal with. At first, his panting as they hurried on grated on Emory. Later, it began to excite him as did the heat of the boy's body whenever he moved close.

They passed two other farms and were on the edge of the town when Arman heard the bleat of a lamb on the hill above them.

"One of Mirci's flock, I suppose. Let's retrieve it so he owes us a favor for a change."

Emory had also heard the low growl of a mountain cat, but felt no fear-not of the cat or the gathering gloom. He climbed the hill, his brother close behind.

The lamb, just old enough to graze, was a white ball against the circle of rocks where it had taken shelter. The cat teased it, slashing out, watching the helpless animal cower, then attacking again. Blood stained the side of the lamb's nose, and one front leg. The scent of it seemed to hang heavy in the air. Emory was about to comment on the scent, then realized he shouldn't be able to smell it at all. The cat screeched as they neared, a hunter defending its prey.

"What in the name of the fates…" Arman began.

"Shhh," Emory said. "Move back."

Arman did, keeping his eyes on the beast. Three steps back, he fell. Emory turned. As he did, the cat saw its advantage and attacked.

Emory knew wildcats were wily; the way the animal fought proved it. It had no desire to attack Emory, instead trying to drive him from its meal. Emory stood his ground, pulling out his knife. Smelling no fear, the cat retreated, still between the boys and the lamb.

Arman pulled out his own knife and tugged at Emory's sleeve. "It's Mirci's lamb, not ours. Let the cat have it," he said.

Emory shook his head. In a move that would have seemed suicidal had it not felt so natural, he attacked.

The cat fell onto its back, its claws ready to rake Emory's chest and belly. Instinctually, Emory did the same, landing next to the cat and sinking his knife into its side, ripping it open.

The cat screeched again, this time in pain, and rolled to face Emory. As it did, Arman tried to move behind it. He was too slow, and the cat slashed his arm. Meanwhile Emory made a slash of his own, opening the feline's throat.

Emory heard Arman whoop with triumph, but the sound was dim, meaning nothing. Only the blood coating his arms and chest was real. He licked it, then slid over to the dead beast, buried his face in the soft, wet flesh and began to drink.

"Emory! What are you doing?" Arman grabbed Emory's arm, intending to pull him away.

Reacting with the same instincts as the cat, Emory slashed backward with his knife.

Arman fell, clutching his stomach, moaning as he tried to stop the flow of blood.

Hearing his cry, Emory turned and rushed to his brother's side.

"Arman, I'm sorry," he said. "I don't know why I did that."

Arman looked up at him, seeing the bloodstained face. "What are you?" Arman whispered.

"I don't know," Emory replied. But he did. The marvelous taste of the blood, the life he felt coursing through him, told him exactly what he had become.

Arman sensed the lie, and the truth behind it as well. "You walked home in daylight," he said.

"It pained me."

"You ate Mother's food."

"But I didn't like it."

"Who does?" Arman coughed. "You ate it just the same."

Though it was now fully dark, Emory could see the stain of his brother's blood spreading on the ground and knew the wound was mortal. He cut his arm and held it out. "Arman, if I am… if I am what I think I am, the only way you will survive is to join me."

"Wh-What do you mean?" Arman whispered.

"Do it!"

"You're sure?"

"Arman, please! Do it!"

Arman drank, gagging at the thought of what he was doing, gagging until he died.

Emory sat with his brother across his knee, singing an old song they both loved. Arman never stirred. Emory felt the last shreds of life leave his brother's body, and he mourned. This gift, this curse, this thing that had happened to him probably couldn't be passed on. Arman's body was already cooling in the chilly night air. There was no life here, nor any hint of unlife.

Emory picked up the body and carried it to the corpse of the wildcat. Let the village think his brother died valiantly, slaying the cat.

He mourned, yes, but did he feel remorse? No. He found his lack of remorse natural. What he had done had been an accident, and though he loved Arman and mourned him, he didn't feel responsible.

Not responsible for the boy's death… but responsible to carry the words of Baroness Ilsabet.

He climbed up the stand of rocks where the Iamb had taken shelter, then picked up the frightened animal and took it down the hill to the tavern.

Still dazed by what he'd done, he summoned tears to his eyes, walked through the tavern's doors, and set the lamb on a table near the door, where Mirci was sitting with friends.

"That cat won't plague your flocks anymore," he said thickly. "My brother died while killing it. I left him there because I had no way to

carry him home."

Mirci looked up in shock, and saw Emory and his bloody clothes. "Arman is… is dead?" he asked.

"Yes."

Mirci wrapped his cloak about the shivering boy, sat him down, and bought him a drink. With halting phrases of grief, Emory explained about slaying the cat, that his brother had sought to rescue the lamb but was attacked, and only after a bloody battle did they bring the cat down. Then, shivering and tearful, he snuffled and changed the subject, as though he could speak no longer about the trauma. Instead, he told them about Baroness Ilsabet, relaying the message she'd given him.

The sympathy of the men turned suddenly hard. They, too, seemed happy for a new topic, one that brought anger, not grief. "And we're to believe she has our interests at heart? What about the men her soldiers took?" Mirci asked.

"They all but killed someone. That could hardly be overlooked," the innkeeper said. He'd been serving ale to soldiers and rebels alike for years. Everyone knew he longed for peace.

"They were Emory's friends," Mirci went on. "They fought for the boy."

"They had no reason to."

"They thought you were being tortured."

"Tortured! The baroness is kind. She treated me…"

"A lot better than her father would have."

Someone laughed. Another joined in, until everyone was laughing.

"I'll tell you what I'd do to Janosk's spawn," Mirci said, then held up his knife.

"How dare you threaten her!" Emory bellowed.

He attacked the man with the same force he'd used against the cat, and so swiftly that he knocked the knife from Mirci's hand. It took four men to pull him off.

When they did, Mirci sat up rubbing his bruised throat. "What sort of magic did they use on you, boy?"

"He's shaken up. Who can blame him?" someone said.

Emory decided this wasn't the time or place to relay the baroness's message. He left as quickly as he'd come, shrugging off Mirci's cloak and his offers of a bath, a place to sleep. So tenacious were the villagers that Emory even had to bolt for the door, feigning hysterical grief, and dodge through a few pastures before he could lose them.

When at last he did so, he smiled. That seemed an odd expression, given his brother's death. But he felt no remorse. What troubled him

was how he would react to the rest of his family. He decided to take no chances. When he reached home, he crawled into the barn, took off his bloody clothes and washed in the livestock water trough, then piled clean hay in the corner of an empty paddock and went to sleep. He dreamt that he died and Baroness Ilsabet stood above him laughing as she brought him back to life.

Thunder woke him just after dawn. He sat up and saw his stepfather putting out fresh feed for the plow horse. "What are you doing here?" Erich asked.

Once again summoning the tears, Emory explained with fearful confused words about the cat.

"Arman…" Erich said, suddenly distraught. He turned and fled.

The villagers found Arman's body soon after. They were drawn to the place by the buzzards and crows fighting over who would feast first. Amazingly, nothing had disturbed it during the night. Perhaps the scent of the huge cat had kept other predators away. Emory helped the men carry Arman's body down the muddy slope and lay it on a blanket in the back of his stepfather's cart.

"I was so happy when the baroness released me. But if I hadn't come home, none of this would have happened."

"It's all right," Erich said, resting a bulky arm over Emory's shoulders. "Come back to the tavern before going home. We'll have a drink before we start out."

Emory shook his head. "I want to be the one to tell Mother. Can I ride back alone?"

Erich considered this and nodded. I" ll go to the tavern with the others."

As Emory rode away, he thought of his years with Arman, and something akin to remorse did begin to form in his soul. Emory stopped the cart at the main road on the edge of town. A right turn led northwest toward gold-rich Tygelt and the cave of Sagese, a left to Nimbus Castle. He paused there, thinking he should go to the old seer to ask the best way to end his life before he killed again-but he could not leave until his duty to the baroness was ended.

But the baroness owed him something for taking his life, didn't she? He knew exactly what payment he would ask for, and if he were the only one who knew Arman still lived, it would be enough. With his head bowed and shoulders slumped, he turned the cart toward Nimbus Castle and flicked the reins to make the horses hurry on.

As he approached the castle, a guard rode out to him and glanced at the cart. Emory was thankful he'd covered up the body, and that he recognized the man.

"I need to speak privately to Baroness Ilsabet," he said. "Tell her it concerns the village."

The guard nodded. Apparently they'd been given orders concerning him, for they immediately led him inside. He pulled the cart in a quiet place close to the wall, refusing the stableboy's offer to help him unload. "What I have is for the baroness only. I'll wait here for her," he said, prepared to wait the rest of the day, if necessary.

She came at once. They sat together in a narrow space between the cart and the wall and he told her how he had killed the cat, then his brother out of some instinct he could barely comprehend. "I finally remembered what you did," he whispered. "I brought Arman's body. Do the same to him."

Ilsabet licked her lips and considered the matter. She raised the blanket. "The village knows he died. He can't ever go home," she said.

Emory nodded, downcast. "I suppose not. The road home goes along a cliffside above the river. I could say the cart rolled and the body fell into the water and was carried downstream."

"So what am I to do with him?"

"I thought he could stay here and serve you. He'd do anything for you, as I would if you asked."

So the boy was her slave, and wise enough to know it. She smiled at the thought and looked down at the body again, noting its youth, its strength. "There's a door nearby that leads to a hidden room. I'll need time and privacy. Can you carry him?" she asked.

"I can," he said, and followed her.

Though the hallway was dark, the room itself was airy, beautiful. "The room belonged to a special prisoner years ago. No one will find him there," Ilsabet told him as they returned to the cart. "Now go."

He wanted to ask if she'd send word about Arman$_s$ but it seemed too much to demand. "Should I return as you asked?"

"Yes, but not before. If you value your brother, what you did must be kept secret."

"Please, I want to tell my mother. She's lost a husband, now a son. She'll keep the secret."

"Make certain of it. Tell her that if I hear any rumors about his fate, I'll kill him," Ilsabet said.

"As would be your right," he said.

A smile played across her lips. Her eyes filled with confidence. She nodded. That was enough for him. Emory left, convinced all would be well.

As he rode toward home, the sun sank; his need grew. He would hunt tonight as he had last night. And if he were lucky he could hide what he had become until the month had passed and he went to the baroness and asked her to release her hold on him.

TWENTY-TWO

From the Diary of Baroness Ilsabet

Messengers returned from Shadow Castle soon after Emory left. I took the packet of letters and went into the library with Jorani to read them. As I'd expected, my husband granted all my requests.

Jorani's letter from Peto asked for him to come as soon as possible to Shadow Castle, purportedly to assist Peto's advisors in understanding the special governing needs of Kislova. Jorani actually seemed relieved to be going. I suspect that our night together has unsettled him, and he wants the time to analyze what we've done. I made it clear that I would miss him and be lost without him. As he comforted me, I kissed him. Though he'd been avoiding me since our night together, I felt the passion in his response.

"Don't forget my pets," he said.

It seemed the ideal moment to whisper my news to him. "I think I'm going to have your child."

His shock quickly turned to amusement. "How could you possibly know?"

I explained about the tea Rilca had taught me to make and how I'd taken it faithfully since my marriage. His amusement faded. I think I've given him much to think about during his sojourn in Sundell.

Sagra had also arrived with the returning guards, looking pale and weary. I gave her Greta's room and asked that she go unpack.

Peto's correspondence to me included a detailed diagram and instructions on how to install pipes and pumps to add some luxury to Nimbus Castle. Soon I'll be able to take a hot bath in the privacy of my room instead of in the little bathing room behind the kitchen where the servants wash. I used to envy them their proximity to the hot water on the stove; now I can share their simple pleasure.

immediately sent letters to the most skilled masons in Pirie. Fortunately, Peto had also foreseen my difficulty with them, and though I hadn't requested any money, he sent more than enough to cover the work.

A breeding wife should have her luxuries, I thought. I went upstairs and found Sagra working alongside Kashi, learning how Nimbus Castle was organized. I was happy to have her replace Marishka's servant. Kashi always seemed to watch me as if comparing me to my sister and finding me lacking.

"Now that you see how we live, you probably think us barbarians," I said to Sagra."

"No one who reads as much as you do can be called a barbarian," she replied.

I wondered what she'd think if she knew of the creature pacing the tiny room where my ancestor had kept his mistress prisoner. In truth, I'm not certain what I think of him myself, but I'm thankful Jorani is gone; he'd know in an instant what I'd done if he saw Arman.

The peasant boy, Emory, has changed subtly. He apparently has a need for blood-for the life it gives, perhaps? — and a certain sensitivity to light, but he is hardly vampiric. I think he may have still been dying when I gave him the potion, or perhaps the way he died made the effects of death more subtle.

In any event, it took his brother far longer to revive, and no one who sees Arman will ever mistake him for a breathing, living man.

waited until long after Emory left before returning to Arman's body. I did so because I wanted to see if Jorani had heard news of my visitor but if he had he didn't think to mention it. When all my servants were asleep, I bolted my door, took the potion from its hiding place, and stole through the secret halls to the little room. My fear of the crying ghost made me light every torch, though I've never heard that spectres are frightened of light.

Arman's body was white from loss of blood. I pulled up his shirt and saw that the wound in his stomach was deep. Had he not been dead, he would have been a strong youth, and quite handsome with his thick dark hair, long oval face, and wide-spaced eyes. I thought of someone like him serving me, rushing to fill my every need.

I confess I have never dealt well with male servants. There's an insolence running under their obedience, often thinly hidden. As I'd questioned Emory at length, he'd shown none of it. I doubted his brother would either.

I'd had Emory place the body on the bed. I sat beside it and opened the jaws-not a difficult thing since the body had lost its stiffness-and I poured a few drops of the potion down the dead man's throat.

And waited. And waited. Emory's resurrection had been swift; this would apparently take time. I poured just a bit more liquid into him and waited again.

I'd just decided to go find a book to read when the index finger of his right hand twitched once. Another hour passed. I went for the book. While I was in my room, I opened my door and told the guard in the hall that I would be sleeping late the next morning and did not want to be disturbed. I had decided that it was of the utmost importance that I be present when Arman woke, as if seeing me would bond us as a newly hatched duckling bonds to the first animal it sees.

When I returned, his mouth had closed, and his lips were wet as if he'd licked them. I called his name and got no response. I sat by him through the night.

Certain my absence would be noted if I didn't make an appearance, I went to my room, crawled into bed and rang for Sagra. "I'm so tired," I said. "I'm going to sleep in. Don't bother with breakfast."

As soon as she'd gone, I returned to my experiment. Arman's hands were in tight fists now. The wound in his stomach seemed less raw.

He woke just after noon. He kissed my hand the way his brother had done, then clutched at my sleeve pathetically as a small, frightened child might do. When I ordered him to let go, he obeyed immediately. No problem with his senses, I thought.

"I'm going to leave you now," I said. "Rest. Recover your strength. I'll return tonight."

He looked as if he were ready to cry, but no tears came. The undead, I'd heard, cannot cry, and I wondered if that was the reason. As I moved toward the door, he watched me intently, and I saw a hunger in his eyes, the need that his brother spoke of.

But there are prisoners below, commoners, friends of his. How perfect. How very perfect.

I returned to my room contemplating how best to move a prisoner from his cell to the room where I was holding Arman. As I opened the secret door in the paneling, I heard a light knock on my door.

I checked my skirts for dirt, smoothed back my hair, and opened the door. Kashi stood outside. I tried to gauge from her expression how long she'd been knocking, but could read nothing in it but curiosity over my stare.

"I was just going downstairs. What is it?" I asked.

She looked uneasy, and I wondered how much she suspected. I motioned her inside, closed the door, and stood in front of it, blocking her exit. With nothing to do but continue, she said, "Mow that Sagra is serving you, I wondered if I could be discharged from my duties. You hardly need two personal maids."

"Quite so. What would you prefer to do?" I asked.

"My village's midwife is getting old. She would like to train me." She saw my expression, and went on. "I don't have to leave immediately. I can stay on long enough to show Sagra everything she needs to know."

"You don't have to wait so long to go," I replied.

"No?"

She looked frightened as I took her arm and moved her toward the panel. She had been knocking on my door a while. Perhaps she'd even called my name, or tried the door and wondered why it was bolted.

"First I need your help," I said. I kept a hard grip on her wrist, and

the natural respect of servant for master kept her from making any effort to break loose. I controlled her easily as I pulled her through the secret door and down the long tunnel to the hidden room.

I walked by memory through the darkness, conscious of Kashi's strained breaths. In a moment, she'd find the strength to scream. "Don't make a sound," I whispered. "Do exactly what I say, and I'll give you three months wages as severance. I want you to sit with a very special prisoner of mine. Talk to him. Keep him calm. See what you can learn from him."

"A prisoner?"

"One of the rebels."

"Here?"

"I need to win him over." I unlocked the door to the hidden room. Light streamed into the dark hall. I saw Kashi's eyes begin to water from the glare. Arman's back was to the sunlit window, so all Kashi could see of the boy was his height, his slender body.

I've brought someone for you," I said to him, then pushed the girl inside, locking the door behind her.

I knelt in front of the door and looked through a narrow opening in the center of it. Plates of food had once been passed through it to my ancestor's mistress. I put it to a different use as I watched the drama unfold inside.

Kashi stood close to the door, her hands fluttering nervously as she decided what to say or do. Finally, she took a tentative step toward the boy. "Why are you here?" she asked.

He shook his head.

Another step toward him. "Are you hurt?"

Ah, yes, he was that.

"I can help you." She took his hand, and moved him around so he faced the light.

saw her expression change from doubtful confidence to utter terror. She let out the scream she'd managed to stifle in the passage. The fear she'd displayed in the passage was nothing compared to this, the high-pitched sound rising, extending so beautifully. The walls were thick, lined with earth. No one would hear her, no one but me.

She rushed to the door and pounded on it, then saw the little hole. Kneeling, she spied me looking in and reached her hand through the opening, clutching for my hand.

"Please," she begged. "Please. I won't tell anyone. I promise. Please!"

"Of course not," I replied and brushed my fingertips over hers, giving her just a moment of hope before Arman pulled her away.

It's hard to explain how I felt as I watched him wrap his pale hands through her hair, pull her head back and begin to feed.

Exquisite terror. Glorious fear. Both faded as her life drained, gone all too

quickly, leaving me a faint glow of pleasure.

opened the door and went inside. Arman looked more alive than before though he still had a strange light in his eyes and lack of color to his skin. He stared at the body at his feet, and I saw his remorse, his guilt. Some of his humanity was coming back. I found that good, for if he can pass for human, I will place him in my personal guard. Slaves are always valuable.

I lifted up the corner of his shirt. The knife wound was less raw than before, but the scar would probably be with him forever. Kashi had been right about one thing. I had no use for her-willing slave or no. The terrible wound in her neck would be impossible to hide for very long.

I looked out the window at the river. Night was falling. I had to go. "When it's dark, throw the body down," I said and left him. This time he looked less sad to see me leave. I turned at the door and saw him crouching beside the girl's body, running his fingers across her still, pale face.

Back in my room, I paused to study my reflection in the mirror and saw that it was as beautifully altered as in the times I'd witnessed killing before. This would make no sense even to the most superstitious peasant. I did not make the wound in Kashi's neck or drink her blood. I only watched and listened. I have no special powers, yet I felt her fear, even her death. The work I do is changing me. A weaker woman might vow to turn away from vengeance and justice and death. I can't. My course is set. I welcome it.

Peto woke from the same dream he'd had for weeks, blinked his eyes, and scanned his room, the inlaid tiles with their tiny pattern of teal, gold, and rose, the play of light and shadows on the walls. As always, the dream had been so vivid he'd thought it real, then woke and mourned when he found Mar-ishka gone.

He didn't understand why she felt compelled to return to him night after night, her burial gown white in the dusty moonlight, tears glistening like crystal on her cheeks. "Be wary," she whispered, "Be constantly on guard."

As always, he could not help but question her, but as soon as he spoke, she faded with a look of terror on her face, her image replaced with that of a white wolf that bounded away into the swirling mists of sleep.

He endured the repetitious dream in silence for as long as he could, then sought out Levy, a scribe who had served his father diligently for many years. When the old man's eyes gave out, he was

given a room in Shadow Castle and a promise that he could live out his life there. Now nearly blind, Levy taught servants to read and write with the same patience he'd used to teach Peto himself.

Levy heard him coming and identified him by his step on the stone floor of the hall. "What brings you to me after so many months?" Levy asked.

"I need to speak to you," Peto said.

Levy asked his students to go and motioned for Peto to take a seat.

Peto described his recurring dream. "Can you tell me what this dream means and why I keep having it?"

In most people, blindness seemed an infirmity. Levy, however, just looked contemplative, as if his thoughts were focused inward. Now his expression grew remote as he considered what he knew.

"In parts of Kislova, it is believed a white wolf is not a wolf at all, but the ghost of a werebeast whose soul is caught between the afterworld of men and that of beasts. To find redemption, it must help a spirit who is helpless to right a terrible wrong. Usually the one so helped died through treachery. You're surprised?"

"How did you know?" Peto asked.

"I heard your quick inhale. Why does this information surprise you?"

"When I told my wife about the dream, she said that she didn't know what it meant."

"Perhaps she doesn't know the legend."

Peto laughed. "Ilsabet knows everything. I have never met a more educated woman."

"Then most likely she doesn't believe the story and didn't want to worry you."

"Possibly."

"But you don't think so. You think she lied. Why?"

Was there nothing this man missed? He knew that Levy could be trusted to keep his confidence, so he poured out the story of the Obour family and how Marishka and Mihael had died.

"You're certain Marishka died from an accident?" Levy asked.

"My own surgeon said so. And Ilsabet was with her, right to the end. I've never seen her so distraught."

"And so you have no doubts about Baroness Ilsa-bet's innocence in her siblings' deaths?"

"She is my wife. She will bear my child."

"That wasn't what I asked," Levy said gently.

"I have doubts," Peto whispered, admitting the truth for the first time.

"Then you ought to heed Marishka's advice, at least until those

doubts are resolved."

Peto agreed. He was always a direct man, and his plan reflected his personality. He went right from Levy to Jorani. Since his arrival, the dour Kislovan lord had followed Ilsabet's habits and spent most of his time in the library. When Peto joined him, Jorani was just finishing a history of the Casse family.

Peto patted the book. "The man who wrote it was seeking favors from my father," he commented. "So the account is far too flattering."

"So I guessed." Jorani's smile, while sincere, was unsettling. "Were you looking for me?"

"I was," Peto said and took a seat across the table from Jorani. "I want to ask your opinion about a dream I've been having." He described the dream exactly as he had to Levy. As he did, he watched Jorani for some sign of shock, of concern, anything at all that would tell him if Jorani had any doubts about the manner of Marishka's death. He saw nothing.

As soon as he'd finished and asked the meaning of the dream, Jorani replied with a story similar to the one he'd heard from Levy, though with more detail. "Legends say that the werewolf possesses power even in death, and that power enables it to serve the spirit it befriends. Once its job is complete, its human soul passes on to be judged by the fates."

"Should I be wary?" Peto asked.

"You rule one land. You have claim to a second. It would be naive to be anything but wary."

"Of whom?"

The lie came next; Peto was certain of it. "Most of the lords of Kislova are supportive of the alliance you and Ilsabet have created," Jorani said. "But not all. Ilsabet has powerful enemies, if only because she is a woman and people think her vulnerable."

"Is she?"

Jorani shook his head. "You know her better than that," he said. He hesitated, then asked, "Does Ilsabet know about these dreams?"

"I told her." Peto repeated what Ilsabet had said, and for the first time saw a hint of shock on Jorani's face and a bitterness Peto thought he understood. Jorani cared for Ilsabet, and had believed her innocent. Now he wasn't so sure.

"She knows the legend, though she doesn't believe it," Jorani said, concluding as Levy had. "She probably didn't want to worry you."

"But she has," Peto replied. "I intend to tell her so."

They spoke a while longer on other matters, then Peto left the Kislovan lord to his reading. He returned to his own chambers, sat, and contemplated the sudden change in his emotions.

Ilsabet! Lover. Wife. Mother of his child.

Ilsabet. Poisoner. Murderer of her sister, quite possibly her brother. Mother of his child. He'd been filled with joy when he'd gotten that news. Now there was some darker emotion attached to the pregnancy, something sad and inevitable.

Could she really be guilty of such terrible crimes? Looking at the matter logically, he knew she could. Even so, were she here now, he was certain he would take her in his arms, would love her.

However, he decided to keep well informed of his wife's activities. To that end, he wrote a letter and asked the messenger to deliver it in private to Lieutenant Shaul.

TWENTY-THREE

When his transformation was complete, no one from Pirie would have recognized Arman as the peasant boy whose body had been lost to the swift waters of the Arvid River. His ruddy face was gaunt; his dancing blue eyes had become cold and distant. With his hair cut and his thin beard neatly trimmed, he wore the blue-and-gold livery of the Obours as if he had always been a part of their guard.

Though he had a place of honor in their ranks, the other guards avoided him, first because they found his sudden arrival odd and his intensity disturbing, later because it was clear that he was Ilsabet's most cunning spy. Anything critical said about her in his presence, even in jest, got back to her. Men were disciplined and drummed out of the guards. One was even beheaded for making what the baroness saw as seditious remarks. Arman's ears were so keen, people did not even whisper in his presence.

Arman's coldness had an unusual affect on women. Most of the serving girls stayed away from him, but a few of the boldest found his aloof demeanor a challenge. He ignored them all, and the girl who accepted a dare and stole into his room one evening was never seen again. After that even the women left him alone.

The only person unaffected by him was the baroness.

She had him with her every day, standing behind her during the afternoons when she received guests and petitioners, during the evenings when she ate. At night he remained outside her door while she slept. When he was relieved at midnight, he often didn't return to his room. No one knew where he went.

Had he been some other man, people might have thought that he had some private access to his lady's bed, but the kind of devotion he showed to Baroness Ilsabet was not that of a lover but of a slave.

Besides, the baroness was certainly pregnant, with a child due in the spring. Though she had never looked so beautiful, flattery seemed to have uttle effect on her. During state dinners and fetes, she often wore a remote expression as if her mind were occupied elsewhere.

In truth, her thoughts were often on the night and Arman.

His brother had reported back to her as she'd instructed. After getting information on the temperament of the people who lived around Pirie, she asked him the important questions:

Food gave Emory some nourishment once a week; more often, he would lie awake with hunger gnawing at his insides until everyone slept. Then he would sneak out of the house and travel into the hills. If he were lucky, he would catch some wild animal to kill. If not, a sheep or dog would suffice. Once when the need was on him, he

stumbled on a sleeping beggar. He'd done his best to subdue the man, drink the blood he needed, and let the victim go. The beggar'd had other ideas, and Emory had been forced to kill him.

He readily admitted that the human blood gave the greatest satisfaction, and he hadn't had to leave his house for ten days after.

Arman had less control. He could eat nothing at all and had to seek out blood every other night. Sometimes he roamed the hills as his brother did. Whenever soldiers captured a group of outlaws, Ilsabet would keep them in separate dungeons. After a few days with the damp and the rats, they could always find a prisoner desperate to escape. Arman would offer to show a way out in exchange for gold or information. The man would follow and find himself in the little room where Kashi had died.

With her fear of ghosts kept at bay by the presence of her undead slave, Ilsabet would sit on the bed and watch Arman play with his victim as she had requested, subduing, drinking, letting the man recover, then attacking again. The game would go on night after night until, weakened by the loss of blood, the victim died and was thrown into the river after dark to float downstream.

One of the prisoners, more emotional than the others Arman killed, went insane. They kept him for a week before Ilsabet tired of his screams, decided she needed the room for other things, and ordered Arman to kill him.

Fear was her nourishment, as blood was Arman's. People dismissed her sudden radiance as natural, attributing it to the fact that she was expecting a child. "Brides and future mothers," they would say and comment that once Peto saw her again, he would never leave her side.

With access to Jorani's hidden room, and all that it contained, Ilsabet was working to assure that as well.

With only Arman to guard her, she would sit for hours in the dank guardhouse. The prisoners she'd chosen would be brought one by one to her presence. They'd be offered ale or cider, and food of a quality rarely seen in Kislova, let alone in the dungeons. The questions were vague, about their towns and people.

Many of the prisoners grew to welcome her visits, fawning over her, hoping to be released. But there seemed to be a price for her favor, for her favorites stayed in the dungeons the longest and seemed to adjust most poorly to the darkness and the damp. She wrote in her journal:

Before each visit, I note the dosage of web poison I administer and the vehicle chosen for it. Ingestion gives the quickest and most lethal results, though anyone would know that the victim was murdered through poisoning. Besides, whoever is tasting Peto's food

will undoubtedly fall over before Peto ever gets his fork to his mouth.

Breathing in the strands creates a somewhat slower death, but death nonetheless. Though the victim does not die at his supper table, he dies soon after, and the method is noticed. My victim, a burly sheep rustler from Tygelt, sneezed, realized what I had done, screamed some gibberish about his family, and attacked. Arman subdued him and held him tightly while I watched him sicken. When it became clear death was inevitable, I gave him to Arman. Even my mistakes serve their purpose.

On the other hand, touching a minute piece of the web causes illness. Repeated contact makes the victim sicker, but the malaise is so general it can be mistaken for any number of things. The victims fortunate enough to survive these poisonings are released. In the land, my subjects speak of my mercy. I find it amusing.

It has been five months since I conceived. I think of the child, Jorani's child, growing within me, and I take great precautions in my work. Arman is most helpful in this. Since I determined soon after his rebirth that poisons no longer affect him, I don't even get close to my lethal concoc-tions. Instead, Arman mixes them and conducts experiments under my direction. I know he despises this work, but he has no choice. Soon, Peto will come to me. I'll be ready.

Baron Peto, accompanied by Lord Jorani, left for Nimbus Castle a week before the child was due. He deliberately spent some hours dining with the merchants and minor gentry in Pirie so that he would arrive at the castle late at night, when Ilsabet and the household were sleeping.

As soon as he'd settled into the same rooms he'd occupied for so long, he sent for his lieutenant.

Shaul had been awakened as soon as the baron had arrived. Washed and dressed in the black-and-gold livery, he appeared shortly after being summoned, standing at attention until Peto asked him to sit down.

"Your letters were as informative as I'd hoped," Peto commented. "I do need to ask a question, however. In your opinion, how did my wife govern in my absence?"

Shaul's eyes had been fixed on his master's. Now they shifted uneasily to focus on a crystal vase above the mantle. "I hardly know how to answer."

"Look at me and answer honestly. That's all I demand, and I expect you to obey."

Harsh words, gently spoken. Shaul tried to meet the baron's eyes, but failed again, not because he intended to lie but because he did not want to see the baron's expression when he told the truth.

"She governs by extremes, Baron. You will see dramatic changes in the castle. There are oil lamps in all the halls, a mosaic floor and crystal chandeliers in the great hall. There is also a bathing room in your chambers as there are in hers and Lord Jorani's with the hot water pumped from the kitchen as it is at home. She managed the changes in record time."

"She relished the hot baths at Shadow Castle. I'd expect her to be eager to have that work completed," Peto remarked.

"The mason overseeing the pipe fitting seemed to have had a huge opinion of himself and little inclination to finish on schedule. The baroness imprisoned his son. if he hadn't finished at the time he'd agreed to, she would have beheaded the boy."

"He finished on schedule, I presume."

"Three days early. She gave him three gold pieces for his diligence."

"Said diligence was hardly unexpected," Peto commented. He might not approve of Ilsabet's methods but they were certainly effective. "How do the people accept her?" he asked.

"The merchants and guildsmen love her because of the amount of money she has spent, the nobles because she shared the taxes on the merchants with them. The farmers and peasants go about their business without comment, as they do everywhere. The rebels and outlaws are quieter since we captured and imprisoned two dozen of their men, but I wrote you about that."

"Of course. Are they still in the castle?"

"Ten are. Three of the outlaws were recently executed as a reprisal for a raid on a caravan heading for Sundell. Five were found dead in their cells. Since they didn't die at the same time, we suspect plague rather than poison. Fortunately, the plague doesn't seem contagious. No one has died for over a week…"

Plague! Peto thought. Alarmed, he decided to move his child to the healthy climate of Sundell as soon after the delivery as possible.

"Six simply disappeared one at a time," Shaul continued. "Since everyone in this country seems related, I suspect that one of the Kislovan guards helped the men escape."

"I understand that some of the men's families have asked the guards to search for them."

"The search would be far easier to justify if we thought that the man wanted to be found, Baron," Shaul replied.

Peto considered what he'd learned earlier that night in Pirie. Over four dozen sheep had been killed in the last few months, their throats torn open. Three men had disappeared. The Pirie gathering blamed cats, goblins, werewolves, vampires, even the ghoulish remains of the dead rebel forces for the killings.

Cats had never been known to kill grown men. As for the goblins, Peto had seen-and smelled! — them often enough to know they weren't in the area. Peto discounted the other theories. Any sane man would.

"Send out a search party tomorrow," Peto ordered.

"You're contradicting Baroness Ilsabet's order?" Shaul asked carefully.

Shaul was right. Peto couldn't give the governing of Kislova over to his wife then return and not even consult with her before taking his rightful place as its ruler. "Thank you for reminding me. I'll meet with her first," he said. "How were the outlaws executed?"

"They were burned at the stake just outside the castle walls. All the men of Pirie were ordered to attend." Shaul forced himself to continue, "I understand that such executions are common in this land, but I have never seen such a barbaric sight. You asked for my candor, and I give it. I don't think public tortures are fitting. The baroness may rule, but she does so in the name of Sundell."

"Thank you, Shaui. Is there anything else to report?"

"Only that she's adopted another Sundell custom. She has established her own company of private guards, the members pulled from the ranks of the Kislovan soldiers."

"A wise move. Is that all?"

Shaul hesitated, then added, "Their leader frightens me. I've never felt this way about a man before, but it's true. Arman never raises his voice to his men, yet they obey him without question. And his loyalty to the baroness is unwavering."

Peto chuckled to hide his concern. "She chose well," he said. "If you've nothing to add, go back to bed. We'll speak more tomorrow."

After Shaul had gone, Peto undressed, then went into the new addition to his rooms. The tub was large, the wood enclosing it beautifully carved and polished. The pipes were crude and stuck straight out of the wall with carved letters on the wall labeling hot and cold. A few blows to them resulted in a flow of hot water and soon after he lay in the tub, reveling in a luxury he hadn't expected to find here so soon. And she'd paid the man extra for finishing the work early. He found her tactic almost amusing.

In the morning, after a servant brought a plate of fruit and fresh-baked bread, Peto sent for his wife. She came just as he was finishing his meal, a red velvet dressing gown wrapped tightly around her body to keep out the chill. Though she was huge with child, her features were as exquisitely beautiful as before, even more so it seemed because she had a serenity and confidence about her that he'd never seen before.

He made her sit down, poured her tea, then sat across from her,

listening while she described her months alone in the castle. Her description of events matched his lieutenant's. When he asked why she hadn't sent out a search party to look for the missing rebel prisoners, she grew defensive. "They disappeared from their cells in the middle of the night, one by one as if intending to make me look like a fool. I won't add to their ridicule by sending my men out looking for them. Besides, it's only three miles to Pine. If something happened to the men, and we find even one body half-eaten by cats, the rumors will only increase."

"The villagers mentioned werewolves and vampires, as I recall." He'd intended the comment to be humorous.

Ilsabet didn't smile. "Superstitious fools!" she said. "Give in to their foolish beliefs now, and they'll be sharpening stakes tomorrow."

"They've reason to be concerned though."

"Cats killed a few sheep. It happens."

"Fifty-three sheep represent a sizable loss to farmers looking forward to the high prices they'd get for wool in Sundell."

"So many?" Ilsabet frowned. "I had no idea. I've some good hunters in my guard. I'll send out a few with orders to track and destroy the cats."

Jorani settled into his tower room. As soon as the servants finished unpacking his clothes and the books he'd brought from Shadow Castle, he bolted the door and went down the narrow stairs to his private room.

His supply of candles and lamp oil had been depleted. The spider lay content in the center of her web. The ants had continued to expand their tunnels. Ilsabet had cared diligently for his pets. From the lack of dust on his books, he was certain she'd also been studying. In the center of the table, no doubt set out for him to read, was the black book on raising the dead.

What a strange creature she was, with her fragile looks and unforgiving nature. Whenever he saw one of the Sundell soldiers riding out on patrol with a bit of his sweetheart's lace tied to his leather gauntlet, he thought of Ilsabet.

A rustling in the passage to the dungeons drew his attention from the book. He looked toward the dark door, expecting Ilsabet to join him. Instead, a gaunt young man stepped from the darkness into the dim lamplight. From the way he'd traveled the passage without benefit of light, Jorani guessed that he'd walked it many times. Then he saw the man's eyes, dark, intense with hunger. As calmly as he was able, Jorani backed away, toward the hanging globe. If need be, he would fling the glass bowl, spider and all, at the intruder and pray that none of the web touched his own skin before he escaped. "Who

sent you?" Jorani asked.

"The baroness. She said I am to tell you she used the potion, and that I am the result. I am to answer your questions."

"Then sit," Jorani said.

The man did, and pulled back the hood of his black cape. Certain what the youth had become, Jorani winced. How could she have done it, and how could she have let the man live when she saw the result?

"My name is Arman, and I am captain of Baroness Ilsabet's guards," the man said, and in a simple, emotionless voice, he told his story.

"How do you survive?" Jorani asked Arman.

"On men taken from the dungeons, and when those aren't available, on sheep. Baroness Ilsabet said she is concerned about the loss of the sheep. She said that you would know what must be done."

Would know! Jorani thought of all his suspicions about Marishka's death, then Mihael's. He'd always believed Ilsabet incapable of the murder of those she loved, but now he knew she was capable of anything. The affection he felt for Ilsabet vanished in the hour that he sat and spoke with Arman-not only because of her ruthlessness but because of her cowardice. She should have told him all of this herself, then asked for help rather than all but demanding it. "You tell me that she created two of you?" Jorani asked when Arman had finished.

When Emory hunted, he occasionally came across Arman in the hills above the town. He helped Arman hunt his prey, watched him kill with such savagery that Emory was sickened by it. Nonetheless, they were brothers; Emory would never betray him.

Emory rarely slept at night, and when the sheep attacks began, he had an excuse for staying awake. Though his mother worried, he stayed outside with their flocks, guarding their corral. Spring had rolled in quickly. The land smelled of life-new grass, new leaves, the early wildflowers that already dotted the hills.

One night, he saw his brother riding toward him, his face white in the moonlight, his eyes shadowed and dark. Usually he was alone, but tonight there was another rider as well, a tall man on a magnificent stallion. He recognized the horse first, then the rider.

Arman didn't greet him, didn't ask about the family. Instead, he said, "Lord Jorani wishes to speak to you. The baroness wants you to answer all his questions truthfully."

Emory sighed. "Always more questions," he said. They walked together down the path that led to the cliff above the river, the same cliff from which he'd said he'd lost his brother's body so many months ago. Below them, the swollen Arvid River cut a line of silver through

the forest. The evening was warm, and only a few mists curled above the water. From that spot, Emory could see the tops of the castle walls and the towers rising above the trees.

They tied the horses' reins to low branches then sat together. In the next hour, Emory described how he had been changed, and how he'd killed his brother, then taken him to the baroness to be saved.

"And do you have to kill the way your brother does?" Jorani asked.

"I did in the beginning. Now I control the need and feed off my flock. I don't drink from the same animal twice in a row, and I make certain any animal I use gets extra food for a few days after."

"Did you ever tell your mother what happened to Annan?" Jorani asked when Emory had finished.

"I couldn't. If I had I would have had to explain how I knew. It would have been one more tragedy among all the rest."

"A wise decision," Jorani said. He untied his horse. Arman did the same. Emory watched them mount and start down the narrow path to the river, with Lord Jorani in the lead. At the most treacherous part, Lord Jorani threw a handful of dust into the face of Arman's horse. The beast reared and tried to turn, slipping, falling over the cliff, carrying Arman with it. The rocks held the broken body for a moment, then released it to the insistent current.

Lord Jorani turned his mount carefully and rode back up the path to where Emory waited for him. Emory's arms were at his side. He bowed from the waist, never looking up as Lord Jorani pulled his sword. When the noble hesitated, Emory curled his hands into fists at his sides, nodded, and stood motionless as the sword sliced down through his neck.

When Jorani returned to the castle, he went directly to his tower rooms and penned a note to Ilsabet.

"I did as you wished," it said.

After reading it, Ilsabet pulled out her journal and wrote: "There's been too much suspicion in the countryside. Eventually Arman or Emory would have been caught, and my subjects would have learned the truth. Besides, since Jorani returned, Arman's usefulness is over. Now all traces of my experiment are gone, and I can rest easy, concentrating on the future."

She hesitated, then added a happier thought. "As I sit here, my child moves inside me. The midwives tell me it will be a strong boy. I'm thankful. At last I'll have my heir."

PART III

THE JUDGMENT OF THE FATES

TWENTY-FOUR

From the Diary of Baroness Ilsabet

My child was born just after midnight on the spring solstice, following a labor of more hours than I care to remember. Fortunately, he was as strong as the midwives expected, for when they realized this, they were freer with the pain killing potions than they would have been. By the time of the delivery, I was giggling, and when I looked into the red-wizened face that resembled a sun-cured old man, I laughed.

Peto had been beside me through the delivery, holding my hand, doting on the newborn-hardly a pretty sight-with as much love as I felt.

We named him Lekai after the Obour ambassador who a century ago had forged the first trade agreements between Kislova and Sundell. Since it was also the name of my maternal grandfather, I thought it an ideal choice.

Lekai is a quiet infant. His coloring is strange. His skin is as pale as mine, his eyes deep amber, his hair a dark auburn. He resembles no one so much as Peto, and when I look at him I wonder if the potion I blended to Rilca's specifications had actually worked. I've tried to ask Jorani his opinion, but he refuses to discuss the matter, telling me only that everything turned out as it was intended to.

Now that the child is born, I wish I could move against Peto, especially since he's already planning our trip to Sundell this autumn. However, the mid-wives tell me the first two years of a child's life are the most precarious. I don't want to kill Peto until Lekai is old enough to be assured of one day ruling, but given Peto's strange behavior, I think I may have no choice.

Peto never before seemed suspicious of me. Though he no longer has his food tasted, he's arranged for it to always be served buffet-style. When I dine with him, my plate is filled first; he eats the same dishes I do, then lets the servants finish the copious leftovers. Fortunately, no one in the kitchen has fallen ill, or he'd undoubtedly blame me.

Soon after the child was born, I also discovered that Jorani had turned against me. When I went through the passage to his secret room, I found the door barred from the inside. In order to enter it, I'd have to go past the guards on duty and through Jorani's chambers. I could, of course, but once I did, one of the servants would run for Jorani and I'd have to face him. Better to wait for that confrontation. Besides, I already possess everything I need to move against my husband. There is no need to do anything now but wait.

Ilsabet ignored her journal for months while she tended her child and lands. Peto was content to let her rule, offering advice only when she asked for it. Three months later, Ilsabet pulled the journal from its hiding place and continued.

From the Diary of Baroness Ilsabet

Though my beauty seems to have faded somewhat in the last few months, my figure has returned so that I was able to wear the silver gown this evening when I presented my heir to the Kislovan nobles.

The crystal chandelier in the entrance hall was lit, the candlelight bouncing off the polished facets. A brass burner of incense gave an exotic scent to the room. In the great hall, dozens of candles made the room glow so that everyone could admire the blue and gold tiles of the Kislovan crest inlaying the floor.

The feast was magnificent, laid out in the style of Sundell. A pair of suckling pigs flanked either side of a buffet the length of three men. Kislovan nobles had never seen such an array of food so elegantly served on silver plates, servants running between the buffet and dining tables, refilling them with whatever the diner wished next.

We presented Lekai after the meal. He sat on my lap as the nobles came forward, bringing their gifts. My son received enough engraved silver cups and rattles to satisfy a litter of Lekais. Lord Ruven brought the most lavish gift-a shield half the size of a man's, engraved with Lekai's name, and beneath it the cloisonne rendering of a merged Obour and Casse crest. When Ruven danced with me, he whispered that what my father had begun with arms, my son would complete through more peaceful means.

We arranged a meeting to discuss the needs of the northern part of Kislova. I'm sure that when we confer, anything he suggests will increase his power. Unlike other Kislovan nobles, he knows how to wield it.

wore the same perfume that enchanted Peto before. Though I sensed his passion for me as we sat together at the table, he fought my allure. Finally, when we danced together, I whispered to him, "The midwife tells me that I'm quite healed."

When he pretended not to understand, I kissed him. I felt passion in his response, but only for a moment. I think that in truth he wanted to push me away. I willed my eyes to fill with tears, then left him standing alone with the other dancers. As I walked from the great hall, I heard one of the guests-who'll probably plead drunkenness as an excuse-call out, "The winters are harsh in both our lands. One heir is never enough."

Stifling a smile, I went upstairs and waited. It's been hours, but Peto has not come.

I am beginning to wonder what Jorani has told my husband. I fear that if I do not act quickly, Peto will take Lekai to Sundell and I will lose both my child and my intended victim.

After the feast, Peto was constantly busy, often absent from Nimbus Castle for weeks on end, touring the country or returning to Shadow Castle to handle the problems of Sundell. On his rare visits, Peto managed to never be alone with his wife. Finally, following a meeting with him, she ordered the servants to leave them alone. "Go," he said, then sat back in his chair and watched her pace the hall.

"Have I done something wrong, something to make you hate me?" Ilsabet asked.

"I don't know," he replied.

"You don't know!" She seemed ready to slap him.

"I learned the meaning behind my dream, and that you knew it."

"Oh, is that what this chill is all about. Because I didn't want you to start thinking as foolishly as some Kislovan peasant, you think me guilty of Marishka's death, perhaps even Mihael's."

In as emotionless a tone as he could manage, Peto presented his case, detailing everything from the poisoned rats to Mihael's ravings before his death. "I haven't judged you, but I have doubts, and they're more horrible than anything," he concluded.

"Then I suggest you and your doubts go back to Sundell for good!" she screamed, threw her goblet at his head, and stormed from the room.

He'd expected tears, denial, not fury. That evening, as he passed his son's room on his way to bed, he saw his wife sitting beside the cradle, dangling a silver ball above Lekai's face, laughing as he batted at it with his tiny hands. "He has keen eyes," Peto said. Ilsabet looked at him with such venom that he didn't join her, but left without another word.

Later, alone in her own chambers, Ilsabet told Sagra she wished not to be disturbed while she napped. Then, reaching into the carved box that held her writing paper, quills and ink, she pulled out a small bottle of milky-looking oil, wrapped it in a rag, and slipped it into her pocket.

Traveling through the familiar tunnel, she emerged in her husband's room. Moving quickly to his chair, she poured a few drops of the oil onto the carved armrests and watched it sink into the polished wood. Careful not to touch the substance, she blotted up the few drops that had not been absorbed, then as an afterthought, she rubbed this into the quill he used for writing. After carefully folding

the oily spot into the center of the rag, Ilsabet returned to the tunnel.

One section was occasionally missing stones. She wedged the rag into the widest such gap, pushing it back until it fell in the hollow space between the inner and outer castle walls, coming to rest above the bones of those who'd died building Nimbus Castle.

That night she wrote:

I marvel at my ingenuity. The poison in the oil is so dilute that had I touched it to spread it on the chair and quill, I would have felt vaguely out of sorts for a day or two. But Peto is always sending letters home. Now, every time he sits in his chair, he will get a bit more of the web poison onto his skin. He'll grow ill, take to his bed, then slowly recover, only to get up, go back to his work, and sicken again.

Though I would love to remain here and watch his decline, I think it would be wise for me to be well away from Nimbus Castle during the onset of his illness. Custom makes that easily arranged. Putting away her journal, she called for Sagra* "We're going on a journey," she said. "I'm going to show you something of my land."

"May I know the destination?" the girl asked. Ilsabet smiled. "Of course. It is a custom that all good mothers consult the Seer about their children's futures. I can hardly set an example for my subjects if I don't go."

Sagra glanced out the window at the storm brewing in the western hills. "Does Lekai need to go with us?" she asked.

"No, and I'm thankful. The storms are fierce in early summer but I can't put the journey off any longer. We'll go tomorrow morning."

"Shall I tell the stablers to prepare your coach?"

"Three horses. Two to ride, the third for our gear."

"Baroness…?"

Ilsabet hastily explained about the way petitioners to Sagesse must travel. "It's only three days' ride, at most," she concluded. "If the weather turns ugly, we can certainly stop at an inn. On the way back, we can do as we please. Lord Ruven's estate near Tygelt is very beautiful. We'll stop there for a time before we come home." She handed Sagra a note. "Take this to the stables and see that they prepare everything as I ordered."

"You're sure we'll be safe?" Sagra asked.

Hsabet nodded.

"May I be allowed to ask the Seer a question?" flsabet nodded again. "But take something you value to leave her in exchange for her advice."

From the Diary of Baroness Ilsabet

Sagra is a talkative girl. By the next morning when we set out on

our journey, the entire castle had learned of it. Peto even came and demanded that we take at least a pair of guards. Fortunately, Jorani joined us at that moment. It took our combined efforts to convince Peto that our mission was sacred, that not even the ghosts of the land would harm us.

"Do the cats consult the Seer, too?" Peto retorted. "I'll not have the mother of my child…"

"The mother of your child is doing her duty," I insisted. "There's a sword strapped to my saddle, and! carry a knife. Even cats recognize a blade. They'll leave us be. As to the outlaws, Sagra and I both wear the cream-colored armbands of those making a pilgrimage to Sagesse. No one will dare incur the wrath of the fates by harming us."

I left him standing there, still fuming. As I rode away, I thought of all the notes he undoubtedly had to write to his huge family in Sundell. I pictured him sitting at his desk, one hand on the carved chair arm, the other on the quill. The thought made me feel much better.

TWENTY-FIVE

Peto spent the day outside Nimbus Castle, sitting in the warmth of the spring sun, watching masons repair a crumbling section of the west wall. Ilsabet had managed well in his absence, well enough that he could simply sit and do nothing for hours. At nightfall, he went inside, took a long bath, and went to bed.

Other matters kept him occupied the following morning. At noon, he went out and inspected the work on the castle wall. Again, the sun reminded him of the high plains at home, and he ate his midday meal outside. That evening, he finally sat down to write his mother and tell her about the presentation feast and the gifts Lekai had received.

He had finished the second page of the letter when a wave of dizziness made the words blur and his stomach lurch. He managed to slip the letter into an envelope and seal it before making the mad rush for his chamber pot. He just made it, and some time later, when Gidden brought him a pot of hot tea, Peto was lying on his bed, his face white, his forehead dotted with beads of cold sweat.

"I probably ate some bad meat in the feast," he said weakly. "If so, half the Kislovan nobles will be abed by tonight. When they recover, they'll probably start another revolution."

"It's been three days since the feast, Baron," Gid-den reminded him gently as he pulled a coverlet over Peto's shivering body. "More likely, the sun in this country is stronger than you suspected."

Peto nodded. "Start a bath for me and build up the fire. I'll stay inside tomorrow. I've at least a half-dozen letters to write."

Gidden did as the baron asked. When he'd lit the fire, he noticed the quill lying uncleaned on the baron's desk. As he wiped it on the blotting rag, he felt suddenly strange, as if the room had shifted under his feet. Perhaps there was some illness running through the castle. If so, he'd have to take it easy, he thought. At his age, illness affected him more than it did younger, stronger men. He went into the bathroom, washed off the bit of ink that had stained his hands, then helped Peto undress.

Though Ilsabet thought the cool, dry weather marvelous, Sagra had been raised in a warmer climate. When they stopped to camp, Ilsabet chose the most sheltered place she could find. Nonetheless, Sagra shivered and moaned through the night, getting up often to build up their fire.

Ilsabet dreamt she was a little girl again, practicing penmanship in Jorani's sunlit tower room. Her father came in and looked over her

shoulder. He complimented her on her work, then carried her on his shoulder down to the stables. His horse was saddled and ready, and with Ilsabet in front of him, he rode down the path that led to the mainland and up to Pirie.

It was the week of the harvest festival. Dancers and jugglers entertained the crowds; craftsmen from Kislova and Sundell did a lively business. When they saw the baron coming, they turned and cheered him.

Ilsabet flushed with nervousness and pride as they rode through the crowd.

He bought ribbons for her hair, a bound blank book-the first of her many journals-to record her thoughts. They ate honey cakes and laughed at the magician and the slapstick performers.

That night, in the stables, she turned to her father and wrapped her arms around his neck, planting a sticky kiss on his cheek. "I love you more than anyone," she said. "I always will."

And the dream folded in on itself, becoming dark and tragic with a sudden burst of red.

She woke and sat by the dying embers, beneath the multitude of brilliant stars that dotted the moonless sky. Here, in the stillness of the night, devoid of all the luxuries of her station, she faced the past and future honestly. She thought of her family and how only she and Lekai still held the blood, the essence, of her father. Her course had been deadly, and she had not reached the end of it.

The night wind increased, brightening the embers, whispering in the tops of the scrubby trees, moaning in the rocky outcroppings around them. It seemed to speak, the words simple, easily understood.

No. Turn back.

Turn back? From this visit to Sagesse? From the course she had set? She considered what she'd been forced to do-Marishka slowly dying while Peto mourned. Mihael. Greta. Kashi.

Their faces formed in the darkness; a hallucination this time, she decided, because the expressions were so human, so full of forgiveness, of understanding. Ilsabet saw Peto as he'd looked when he held Lekai for the first time. She moaned, a sound low, soft, and secret, and shut her eyes, concentrating on the one face she truly missed.

Turn back. It seemed to be her father's voice this time, but it could only be a hallucination, or some trick of the Seer's.

"No!" she whispered to the empty land. No. To abandon her plans now would make her brother's and sister's deaths useless. One more-the one she'd always intended-and the killings would be over.

Vengeance was waiting, more implacable than mercy. It would be hers.

"Go away," she whispered to the visions, the whispers, and the remorse that accompanied them. Her decision made, weariness descended once more, and she returned to her makeshift bed, watching the stars as she fell asleep.

The following afternoon, she and Sagra reached the path that led to the Seer's cave. Many seekers had camped here while waiting for an audience. There were bits of broken pottery on the ground and a firepit within a circle of stones. Marishka and Kashi had undoubtedly camped here, Ilsabet thought, just as they'd undoubtedly shared the same route.

"I'll climb up with you," Sagra suggested. "With a path so steep, it would be best if we went together."

Ilsabet tightened the laces on her high-topped shoes. "We have to go separately," she said. "Build another fire. We'll stay here tonight."

"There isn't a town nearby?" Sagra asked, hoping no doubt for a bed at least one night.

Even Sundell servants were accustomed to luxury, Ilsabet thought, then said, "Tygelt is hardly a town for two unescorted women, and Lord Ruven's estate is a three-hour ride, best done in daylight."

"We could have an escort back to the castle, couldn't we? The way Baroness Marishka did?"

"Shut up!" Ilsabet said, and slapped her. "You don't mention the dead in Sagesse's land."

Sagra began to cry. "How was I to know?"

Ilsabet didn't comment. Instead, she began the climb. Pebbles rolled from under her feet, and once she fell and found herself looking over the side of the mountain at the piled rocks below. It seemed best not to look down, so she kept her eyes on the path or on the fog forming above her. Marishka had hinted about these mists during her last days of life. Steeling herself for what she might see, Iisabet went on.

Peto stood in the mists, so real that for a moment she wanted to scream at him and remind him that these were her customs, and he had no business stopping her quest. He isn't real, she reminded herself. He can't be, not here.

"Come home," he whispered. "Forget the past. Love me and your child. I know the truth, and I forgive."

This was some trick of the Seer's, a test of Ilsabet's resolve. She would not be turned from her course, not by last night's vision, nor by this one.

As soon as she reached this decision, the mist cleared, and she saw the cave just above her, its dark mouth a perfect oval of surprise. She reached it quickly, and went inside, walking into the cavern and

its milky light. She laid the dagger she'd carried on the journey on the flat stone, then stepped to the edge of a pool, where an old woman sat, a deep blue cloak over her tattered, shapeless clothes, her thin white body. Ilsabet recognized the garment by the clasp. She thought of Marishka leaving it here and just for a moment the memory softened her.

"I know you, Baroness Ilsabet Obour," Sagesse said. "I've seen you in your sister's vision, and in my own. I've seen the death your presence brings. Why do you come to me?"

"To ask about the future of my son."

"You are his mother. What other answer do you need?"

Ilsabet was being baited, but she refused to show her anger. "Show me his future," she demanded.

"A simple demand," Sagesse replied, and pointed to the milky pool.

The water glowed white, pink, blood-red. Cold flames rose from its depths, licking the surface of the pool. In their center, a small body burned, Ilsabet heard chanting, weeping, the wailing of an old woman.

"Turn from vengeance, or your son's fate will be on your conscience with the rest."

"I'd never hurt him!" Ilsabet whispered, horrified by the sight of the small body slowly consumed by the fire. When there was nothing left but bones, the vision began to fade until the pool was white again.

"The first death made the second easier, the rest were easier yet." The faces of Marishka and the others formed in the water as Sagesse spoke. "Consider how many you've killed already. When you Finally raise your hand against your son, you'll feel nothing. Whether he lives or dies is no matter. The issue here is your own soul; that and the judgment the fates will render on a woman capable of killing her own child." Ilsabet stood, turned away from the pool. "No. The vision lies," she said.

"This future may not come to pass, but the vision never lies."

Sagesse did not move from her place beside the water. She looked into it and continued, "I know all you will do. Years ago, when your mother came to me, asking about your future, I said your devotion could be your undoing. Sadly, this has been true. If I could stop you, if I could raise my hand and end your life, I would. But it has always been my place to know, not to act."

"Knowing is enough," Ilsabet said. A drop of blood-red formed in the center of the water. Ilsabet did not notice it. Instead, her eyes were fixed on the dagger she'd brought as an offering. "I cannot allow you to know, and live."

"The fate of the ruler is the fate of the land. Kill me, and it will be

cursed forever as you will be."

"Then curse us both," Ilsabet said. She lunged for the knife and whirled, facing Sagesse.

She needn't have moved so quickly. Sagesse's attention was centered on the pool, on the drop of red, expanding in the water as if the pool had tapped some new and terrible spring.

"Be done with it," Sagesse whispered.

Ilsabet stood behind her. With the dagger held in both hands, she stabbed downward. The blade entered behind the breastbone. Ilsabet pulled it out, ready to strike again. But blood spurted across the water and Sagesse fell forward, her body sinking into the pool.

The cave's color changed as the water changed, blood-red and pulsing. Ilsabet flung the knife into the water and fled.

The sky had darkened, and the wind had shifted to the north, becoming cold and vicious. Ilsabet pulled her cloak tight around her body and made her way down the path to where Sagra waited beside a roaring fire.

"And I thought it was cold yesterday. Should I go up now?" she asked.

"You can't. There's a storm coming. We need to find better shelter. Ruven's estate is only an hour away."

"You promised I could ask her a question."

"You'll be blown off the mountainside if you try to go up now! Now come on." Ilsabet went to the horses and began loading their few belongings on the packhorse. Sagra, still grumbling, joined her.

They'd just mounted when the full force of the storm hit. Pebbles fell from the cliffs above them as they galloped away. Moments later, the ground shook, and the two women paused and turned, watching the rockslides destroy the path leading to the Seer's cave.

"Are you sorry you didn't go up?" Ilsabet asked.

Sagra shook her head, then followed her mistress down the well-traveled road.

TWENTY-SIX

As Ilsabet was being received at Lord Ruven's estate, Peto was just getting up from a long nap. The attacks of dizziness over the last few days had vanished, leaving him with a lingering headache. He'd done little through the morning but watch the work on the walls while listening to some of the landowners from the area discussing their methods for raising healthy sheep.

It was hardly the sort of morning he'd spend in Sundell, but these were country people, in touch with the land and its creatures. Besides, all he was required to do was nod from time to time and occasionally add what little he knew about the breeding and feeding of sheep. This gave him plenty of opportunity to watch Lekai sleeping peacefully on his lap.

As soon as Ilsabet had left on her journey, a dark cloud seemed to lift from around the castle. Peto spent more hours with his son, helping the servants bathe the boy, rocking him to sleep. As he did, he sometimes imagined Marishka standing beside them, looking down on them both. Once, her presence seemed so real that tears came to his eyes. This should have been their son; she should have been his wife.

Though it was a cowardly move, he'd decided to go home tomorrow and take his son with him, raising him there, away from the influence of his mother and the barbaric superstitions of Kislova. When the boy was old enough, he could return here and take his mother's place-father and son ruling their lands together.

Peto's bags were already packed. Lekai's things would be assembled quickly just before they left so there would be no chance that Ilsabet would be alerted to what he intended to do.

But he could not go without leaving some sort of explanation. Reluctantly, he handed his son to his nursemaid and went inside, where he took out quill, ink, and paper. He thought for some time before picking up the quill and beginning: Dearest Ilsabet,

It is difficult to tell you why I am leaving with our son. There are many reasons; hopefully not all of them valid. The first is political. There cannot be two rulers in the same land. Now that I am here, it seems all the nobles come to me for advice and aid, and because I am used to ruling, I let them. This is hardly what you or I planned. I want you to rule this land until our son is able to do so, and you can rule it only alone.

The second reason stems from fear. Too many people have died in this castle, and there are rumors of plague. I will not subject our son to it.

The third is personal, and the problem may be entirely mine. I

have tried but I cannot lay my suspicions to rest. Lord Jorani tells me… An attack of nausea and dizziness more terrible than before made him shudder and drop the quill. He tipped over the inkwell. As he tried to stand, his knees gave way, and he fell, heaving on the floor like a sick child.

"Gidden!" he called, amazed how soft his voice was.

Lieutenant Shaul had just been coming to see the baron when he heard the weak cry. He and Qidden pulled Peto to his feet and laid him in his bed. While Shaul saw to the baron, Gidden turned his attention to the mess. The floor could wait. The ink, however, had spread on the desk and ruined the baron's letter. Gidden pulled the quill out of the small puddle and began to clean it off. As he did, he felt faint, and sat down quickly in Peto's chair, his hands gripping the carved arms as he tried to keep his body from shaking.

"You're almost as sick as the baron," Shaul said, frowning. "Baron, what should I do?" he asked.

"Lord Jorani… send for him," Peto replied.

"Stand guard," Shaul said to the soldiers outside.

He ran up the tower stairs, then pounded on Jorani's locked door for some time before Jorani opened it. The room was well lit, and Jorani's clothes smelled of lamp oil but Shaul had little time to wonder what the man had been doing. He explained about the attack. Even before he finished, Jorani was rushing down the winding stairs so quickly that Shaul had difficulty keeping up.

In the short time Shaul had been gone, the baron had gotten much worse. His eyes were shut, his breathing labored. Gidden had recovered a bit and was bathing the baron's head with cool water. Shaul moved the servant back to the chair so Jorani could sit close to the baron.

"Tell me what happened," Jorani said.

Peto took a long time to reply. When he did, his voice was weak, his words disjointed. The story was clear enough that when he'd finished, Jorani walked to the desk and studied it a moment. "Take that basin and fill it with hot water. Bring a washrag and some soap," he said to Shaul.

Shaul rushed to obey but as he waited for the basin to fill, he stayed close to the door, watching what went on in the baron's chamber.

Jorani crouched beside Gidden, questioning him in a soft tone. As he did, he stared at the quill, which he finally picked up by the tip, wrapped in a piece of parchment, and placed in his pocket. The fact that he'd waited until Shaul was gone made Shaul suspicious. When he returned with the basin, Jorani bathed the hands of master and servant, then washed Peto's face as well.

"I'll return in a moment with something to make them both feel better," Jorani said.

"Should I send word to the healer?" Shaul asked.

"No… not yet. Stay with your master."

Shaul ignored the orders. After whispering his plans to the baron, he followed Jorani to his chambers.

The tower door was closed, but not bolted. Though Shaul had seen Jorani go up the narrow stairs, he wasn't in his tower room. The hawks screeched a warning but Shaul ignored them. He looked for another door from the room, then saw that the carpet was turned under at one corner. He tried to lift the heavy rug, but it was attached to the floor. He pulled, and the trapdoor opened just as Jorani was coming up the narrow stairs.

"What's down there?" Shaul questioned.

"Nothing that concerns you," Jorani replied. "Now move out of my way. We have to hurry if we're going to save the baron."

"Or kill him," Shaul retorted, looking past Jorani to the books just visible in the dim light, the vials, the scales and oil burner on the table. "You apparently have the means to do it."

"I didn't touch your master."

"Of course not, you didn't have to. Now give me the baron's quill."

"I need it to identify the poison," Jorani said.

"You don't leave this room until I have it," Shaul retorted.

Jorani handed it over. "Now stand aside," he said.

Shaul did. "He'd best make a full recovery," he said as he followed Jorani to the baron's room.

In the time they'd been gone, Gidden died. He lay with his hands still gripping the chair arms, his head in the ink puddle. Peto's condition had worsened. Now barely conscious, he lay with his eyes half open, his breathing labored. Jorani opened a vial of some wicked-smelling liquid and passed it under the baron's nose. Peto's eyes watered. He coughed and tried to speak.

"I'm going to give you something to drink," Jorani said. "Try to swallow it all."

"W-What?" Peto managed to say.

"It will help you fight off whatever's killing you."

"Whatever poison," Shaul added, his hand on the hilt of his sword. If the baron hadn't asked for Jorani's help, Shaul would have already dispensed the justice the man deserved.

"He's most likely right, but until I know for certain, I just want to keep you alive." Jorani poured a spoonful from a second vial. It smelled just as disgusting as the first. Nonetheless, the baron managed to swallow a bit, cough, take more.

Some color returned to Peto's face, but that was all. As Shaul

watched hopefully, Jorani gave him another spoonful of the elixir. Again, Peto coughed and tried to speak. The exertion seemed to wear him out, and his eyes closed. Though Jorani called him, Peto did not respond.

The little bottle was still half full. "Give him more," Peto said.

"I can't. Too much will kill him."

"Then I will," Shaul declared. He reached for the bottle, but Jorani flung it across the room. It broke on the hearth, the liquid soaking quickly into the porous rocks.

"You'll regret this," Shau! said and called to the guard outside. "Take Lord Jorani to the dungeons. Make sure he's shackled and guarded."

"You can't to this," Jorani said.

"I can, and you'll stay there until the baron recovers, or Baroness Ilsabet orders your release."

"You're sending word to her?"

Shaul couldn't tell if Jorani was surprised or relieved. "Of course. She's the baron's wife, and ruler of this land. I'll send a message immediately."

"If she isn't at the Seer's cave, try Ruven's estate," Jorani suggested. He moved closer to Shaul and whispered, "And, Lieutenant, I suggest you keep what you've learned a secret. My room is protected. Anyone who enters there without my leave will die."

"I'll make sure no one goes there," Shaul replied.

"I hope so," Jorani said, then led the way down the stairs, the guards behind him.

Jorani sat in his cell, it and all the dank spaces around it so familiar to him. Though his feet were shackled to the wall, he could have easily picked the lock and fled through the passage, but not as long as one of the Sundell guards sat outside watching his every move.

There were no tricks he dared try, nothing he could do but hope Ilsabet came home soon.

Ilsabet was dining with Lord Ruven and his wife, Lady Alasyn, when the messenger arrived from Nimbus Castle. Ilsabet had expected to receive word of Peto's tragic attack, but hardly so soon, so her shock was more real than contrived. How could she have judged the potency of her poison so badly? Had Peto some habit of brushing the quill against his lips? She'd watched him work; he'd given no sign of it.

Her face grew pale. She seemed ready to faint as she handed the letter over to Ruven. To his credit, Ruven gave no hint of what he'd read. Instead, he ordered the servants to leave them, then shared the note to his wife.

Alasyn read it, then took Ilsabet's hand.

"Peto poisoned… and Lord Jorani imprisoned. No, I can't believe he's guilty. I have to go immediately and get to the bottom of this," Ilsabet said. She tried to stand but lost her footing and fell back into her chair.

"Not today, I think," Alasyn said. "Perhaps tomorrow. You can hardly travel in a state of shock. Now come. I'll help you to your room."

"I'll go this afternoon if I can use your coach and team. I'll travel through the night. The moon's going to be nearly full."

"Are you sure? You've had a shock," Alasyn said.

"Peto is ruler of two lands and there is no one to act in his place. I have to go."

As Ilsabet expected, the reminder was perfect. While she rested, Ruven arranged everything.

Night came. The moon rose. A single shaft of silver fell through a crack in the old tower wall of Nimbus Castle. The cold light touched the hanging globe that held the spider. The creature had Iain in its web for years, eating every day, thanks to its keeper's diligence. Now, after three days with no food, it was hungry. Old memories of hunts revived it. It unfolded its legs and traveled through the thick matted webbing, moving like an invalid at first, gaining strength by the time it reached the lip of the globe. It paused there as if sniffing the currents of air, let out a thin line of deadly thread, and began its descent to the damp floor.

A roach, big enough to crush the spider's delicate body, ran into the web. An instant later, it lay paralyzed while the spider crawled atop of it. Seeking the soft spot on the roach's stomach, it began to feast.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Though Peto lay in his bed, cared for by servants as if he were as helpless as his infant son, his mind was sharper than ever. He determined the means used to poison him, and that Ilsabet had undoubtedly laid the trap. He'd also decided Jorani was the only person who might know the antidote for the poison.

If he'd had a way of communicating this to Lieutenant Shaul, he would have done so, but though Shaul had tried to find some means of knowing if Peto could hear him, the baron could not respond.

Peto was thankful that, though Shaul thought him unconscious, he brought Lekai to the bedside every afternoon. Once Lekai fell asleep on his chest, lulled by Peto's breathing, the faint sound of his heartbeat. Peto slept as well, hardly surprised to dream of Marishka.

Five days passed between his attack and Ilsabet's return. She came directly to his room, kissing Lekai who lay beside him, taking his hand. He could not see her expression but was certain there were tears in her eyes as she asked Shaul to explain.

Shaul did. Ilsabet gripped Peto's hand harder as she listened to how he'd become ill, recovered, then fallen into this near-death. "If it hadn't been for Gid-den, I never would have suspected poison," Shaul said, and explained how the man had died.

"Why did you imprison Lord Jorani? From what you've told me, he probably saved my husband's life."

"But refused to do more."

"Stimulants in large quantities can kill as surely as any poison," Ilsabet countered. "You might have given him a chance to find an antidote."

"He said he didn't recognize the poison."

Ilsabet's hold on Peto's hand relaxed somewhat. He could feel her inwardly rejoicing. Of course Jorani had to know what poison she'd used, Jorani had taught her-or had the pupil moved past the teacher?

"You might have given Lord Jorani a chance," she replied sharply. "You may have made my husband's condition worse."

"I'm sorry, Baroness. With you gone, I wasn't sure what else to do. Forgive me for saying the obvious, but Lord Jorani is the only person in the castle with the knowledge of how to poison the baron."

"That isn't true. I have that knowledge," she said.

Peto gave her credit. Her candor undoubtedly allayed any suspicion Shaul might have of her.

"And the room you discovered is not as well kept a secret as you would think," she continued. "Lord Jorani's servants may know of it. Any who could read could learn what they had to know, particularly

in the months Lord Jorani was in Sundell. You did what you thought was best, but please, have Lord Jorani released immediately. Then, as soon as he is able, have him meet me here so that we can confer on my husband's condition."

Peto heard the lieutenant leave. He was alone with his wife.

He felt his weight shift as she sat beside him on the bed, felt her fingers rest on the side of his neck as if checking for a heartbeat. "You can't see or move or speak, but you can hear me, can't you, Peto?"

He could feel her breath on his ear, smell her perfume. She'd worn the scent that had intoxicated him in the beginning. It had the same effect now. The horror of how she taunted him, and how easily she could continue to do so, made his pulse quicken.

"Of course you can," she said.

He could feel her laughing, feel her body shake, though no sound came from her lips. Instead, a teardrop wet his cheek. She'd been crying when she'd spoken to Shaul. What a marvelous touch.

"I'd intended to kill you, you know," she went on. "But this is so much better. You can't be moved, lest the strain kill you. Let your mother have Sundell. I'll rule Kislova in your place, and my child will inherit both."

She placed her palm over his mouth, thumb and index finger pinching his nose shut. She held it there for just a moment, then pulled it away. "I could kill you just that easily. There'd be no sign of a struggle. I could kill Lekai just that easily…"

An empty threat, he knew. Without Lekai, the Obours would have no control over Sundell.

"… and I will if you ever make an attempt to communicate with anyone. If you're very good, I'll bring the boy to see you every day. Perhaps you could have the same nursemaid. I don't have to ask if you understand. Of course you do. And you'll remember, I'm certain of it."

She kissed him, deeply, passionately. Only then did he hear the footsteps in the hall, Shaul's embarrassed cough. Ilsabet moved away from him, talking to Shaul in quiet tones until Jorani joined them, coming immediately to Peto's side, bringing the musty dungeon smell in his clothes.

He lifted one of Peto's eyelids and examined his pupil. Peto managed to glimpse his smudged face, the stubble on his usually clean-shaven chin, before Jorani closed his eye again. "It's good you kept his eyes shut. Otherwise, he might recover and be blind. He's been this way since I left him?" Jorani asked.

"Exactly," the lieutenant replied. "Sometimes I think he can hear me, that he understands me, but it's probably just wishful thinking. He does seem calmer when Lekai is with him."

"Calmer?" Ilsabet asked.

"I don't know how to explain it, Baroness. It's as if the illness has formed a bond between us."

A bond of affection that was always there, Peto thought. A tear leaked from the corner of one eye. He hoped that no one noticed.

Shaul left soon after. As soon as they were alone, Jorani got up from the bed.

"Did you do this to him?" he asked Ilsabet.

"Is there an antidote?" she asked, instead.

"To the web? You know there isn't. He'll lie like this for the rest of his life. If he's fortunate, it won't be that long. Why did you do it?"

"I promised it to my father before he died, but I'd never expected vengeance as perfect as this." Peto heard her pacing, her footsteps stopping close by his bed. "Do you know that he can hear every word we speak, can feel heat and cold and pain. Look! He's crying. And I'd been foolish enough to think that death would be the perfect revenge."

"Do you think Janosk would have wanted all the deaths that led to this?" Jorani asked. His tone held no persuasiveness, as if he knew her answer already.

She sucked in her breath, the angry sound Peto knew all too well. "I could have done worse. I still can," she said, then left the room, her hard soles clicking on the polished wooden floors.

Jorani remained, moving beside Peto, taking his hand and squeezing it. "I lied to her. If I thought there were no hope for your body, Baron, I would end your life out of mercy. I may have to do that someday, but first let's try to wake you."

Jorani opened Peto's mouth. The same bittersweet taste as before filled it, carried on a scant spoonful of elixir. Peto swallowed. Minutes later he felt a tingling in his hands. He managed to move a finger before all feeling left him. His heart pounded as if it were about to explode. More, he wanted to scream, more.

As if hearing him, Jorani said, "More would kill you. We must go slowly." He sighed. "Ilsabet does not yet realize the price she's paid for this act. Though it's little comfort to you, I'm sure, I doubt she'll be pleased with the news I have for her. I'll return tonight with another dose if I'm still alive."

As he walked down the dark hall toward Ilsabet's chambers Jorani paused at the top of the stairs. Someone had left the carved doors open, and afternoon fog rolled into the lower halls. He'd never seen the river fog so thick in daytime before. He paused and started down the stairs toward the doors. But as the tendrils curled around his feet, he felt a sudden, terrible chill, and retreated, moving quickly down the hall to were Ilsabet waited for him.

She had bathed and changed in his absence, into a simple dress

such as she had worn for their lessons not so long ago. When she saw him, she wrapped her arms around his neck. He gripped her wrists and pulled them loose, vowing to never let her so close to him again.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Ilsabet lay belly-down above Jorani's study and held the lamp at just the angles he requested. Jorani, his face and body wrapped in strips of cloth as if he were a mummy, had already determined the spider had left its globe. Now he tracked it through its kills, from the roach to a pair of dead rats, one near the center of the room, a second close to a crack in the wall. The tiny creature, always shy, had likely found a larger, more perfect home.

"If it's gone into the wall, we'll have to rip apart the tower stone by stone to find it," he called to her. "Build up the fire, and be ready to help me."

Ilsabet backed away from the trapdoor and slipped on a pair of long, leather gloves. Below her, Jorani began unwinding the strips of cloth that covered his clothes and body. He fully expected to feel the sudden tingling, to fall. The floor itself was covered with the fine spider web, so if he hit the floor, he'd die soon after. He climbed out of the room, careful not to touch the rungs of the ladder with his clothes.

He sat on the top stair and handed his boots to Ilsabet, who fed them to the fire in the hearth. He pulled off her gloves and did the same to them, then let his own fall from his hands into the flames. The two vials he had gathered from the room below were heavy in his pocket. Later, he would put on new gloves, pull the vials out, and clean them well, for they were needed now as never before.

"Are there any drawn plans of the castle?" Ilsabet asked. "If so we could trace the places the spider might exit."

"I don't know of any, but I think the wall goes all the way down to the dungeons. It's possible the spider is still in the room and I can't find it."

He closed the trapdoor, took a hammer and nails, and began nailing it shut.

"What are you doing?" Ilsabet asked.

"I don't want anyone finding the door and going down," he said.

"Anyone spying on you deserves what he gets."

"But someone might manage to get out of the room and die in here, and I could give up this space as I have the one below."

"Such a delightfully lethal pet, yet so fragile that someone could easily step on it and never know," Ilsabet said, her eyes sparkling. He hadn't known how much pleasure she'd gotten from his fear until now.

"Then track its venom through the castle."

Ilsabet hadn't considered this. "How long do the spiders live?"

"I've had it twelve years. I understand that if you feed one

regularly it'll live a century or more."

"Well, there's plenty to eat in these walls. Maybe there'll be a dearth of rats for a time."

"Pray that we have an infestation. The spider is a lazy animal, and it needs fresh meat. You might also want to consider putting netting around Lekai's cradle."

Her look of horror twisted into a sardonic smile. "We're all gamblers now. I'll leave you to your bath."

Throughout the day, Peto had sought some understanding of what Jorani's parting words had meant, but nothing came to him. He did, however, listen to the footsteps of servants coming and going in the hall, and felt relief that everything sounded normal. Later, Lekai was brought to him. They slept together. Peto liked to think they shared their dreams. When he woke, the child was gone, and Jorani sat beside him once more.

"I survived," Jorani whispered. "Now let's see if the fates intend for me to cure you."

The liquid flowed down Peto's throat again. This time his heart raced less quickly, and the tingling in his hands extended to his arms.

"There's no one here but you and me, Baron. I won't tell anyone about your progress. Now try to wake."

Peto's eyelids fluttered, and with a sudden burst of will, he managed to brush his fingers against Jorani's hand. Peto had felt such euphoria only once before-on the day his son had been born.

"We seem to be on the right track," Jorani said. "By the end of the week, we'll know how far you can recover. We'll have to. I'm just about out of this potion, and the means to make more has, shall we say, moved out of my grasp for a while." He told Peto about the room, and the spider with its lethal web. "Fortunately," he added, "I think the effects of the antidote don't wear off. We'll go as far as we can with what I still possess, then you'll have to wait until I can collect the ingredients again. That may take some time."

After Jorani left him, servants came to bathe the baron. When they were done, they covered him with a blanket and left.

Peto lay in the darkness, wiggling the fingers of his right hand. He was hardly surprised that the strength in his sword arm was returning first.

The castle grew quiet until the footsteps of the guards patrolling the halls were the only sounds he heard. Peto had just begun to doze off when lisa bet came to him.

She walked past the guards and into his chamber, latching the

door behind her. He saw the candlelight flickering through his closed eyelids, felt the heat of her body as she stretched out beside him.

"Peto," she whispered and kissed him as passionately as she had before.

A wave of revulsion coursed through him, a revulsion all the more terrible because he was helpless to push her away. His expression could not have changed, yet he was certain she guessed his emotion.

She laughed, and kissed him again.

"Someone's been plotting against you. Tomorrow Shaul is going to find evidence linking your poisoning to the escaped rebels. Someone will have to pay for this crime. Fortunately, we have a few rebel sympathizers in chains below. I'll have to think of a suitable end for them.

She lay a hand on his cheek, gentle as any lover's.

"No rebel escaped, of course. Shall I tell you how they died?" Softly, she whispered the tale of the book she had found at Shadow Castle, of Emory, and of Arman, and how they'd feasted together.

When she'd finished, she kissed him again. "I've much to do tonight. I'll give Lekai a kiss for you when I see him," she said. Her body moved away from his. He heard her footsteps heading for the door. As she opened it, he felt a cold, damp draft.

"Go down and shut those doors!" Ilsabet screamed at the guards in the hall. Peto had never heard such fear in Ilsabet's voice before. The servants had been speaking of the unnatural fog for days. He wondered how thick it had become.

The shut doors kept the fog out of the upper floors of the castle but did nothing to dispel the dampness in the lower halls and the dungeons.

The newest prison guard made the night rounds of the dungeon passages. He hated the work-the rats were bolder at night and the dampness so thick he seemed to swim through it-but lack of seniority gave him the most despised duty.

He carried a smoky torch in one hand, a pike in the other. So far, he hadn't had to use the weapon, and he hoped he never would. When he reached the farthest occupied cell, he saw a thin beam of light in the passage beyond it. He leveled the weapon and went on. "Who's there?" he whispered. "Identify yourself, or I'll call the guards."

"It won't be necessary," came the reply. The form moved closer, and he recognized the baroness.

"My lady, why are you here?" he asked.

"Making sure everyone is doing his job," she said.

As she walked toward him, her foot slipped. He reached out to

break her fall.

"Thank you," she whispered and reached up, stuffing an oily rag into his mouth.

The following morning, Peto was hurriedly washed and dressed, then lifted from his bed and placed on a slant-backed settee. With his body covered, he supposed he looked as if he were recovering, or were somehow controlling the mock trial Ilsabet orchestrated.

Three of the rebels were brought up in chains from the dungeons. Peto smelled the scents of filth and fear, heard them whispering to each other, trying to keep their courage up in the face of damning evidence.

A guard had been found dead outside their cell, a poisoned rag just out of reach of the prisoners. The pike that they'd probably hoped to take had rolled beyond their reach as well.

"They may have hoped to get the keys to their cell," Shaul explained, "but that was impossible, since the night guards never carry them." Shaul slipped on a pair of gloves, brought out the poisoned quill, and compared the oil on it to the that on the rag used to kill the guard. "I've shown it to Lord Jorani. He agrees that it is the same."

"How would we know?" one of the prisoners said defiantly. "Do you think the fates came to us in our cell and handed us the poison? You'd best look to your own nobles if you want to solve this death."

The man indicated Jorani, and the Kislovan lord answered dryly, "I had nothing to do with this."

True, Peto thought, but he was also keeping much to himself; a wise move, given the circumstances.

"I would like permission to question the servants," Shaul said.

"Granted," Ilsabet said. "First, execute these men."

"Baroness?" Shaul said, unable to believe the order. "I may need to question them further."

"Then take those two back to their cells, but execute the defiant one."

Peto's chair shook as he felt the man's chains beat across his legs. "Baron Peto, please!" the man pleaded. "I'd never harm you. I celebrated when your troops invaded and brought down the tyrant Janosk. I…"

"You speak of my father," Ilsabet said. "Now take him away. Weigh his body down with rocks and throw him into the river. Let him feel helpless for the moments before he dies, as my husband will feel helpless for the rest of his life."

They took the man away still pleading. His chains rattled as the guards pulled him out the door and down the stairs, cursing the ever-present fog.

At least her method of execution was humane, Peto thought. She

was doing exactly what she'd agreed to do in that matter, as in the others-the mark of a truly loving, grieving wife.

As he'd expected, she become more bloodthirsty in the weeks that followed. Her nature seemed to demand it. Completely in control, she sought out the poisoners with fanatical zeal. Judging from the wooden way some of the servants gave their testimony, they'd been bribed. Others needed no prompting. In exchange for mercy, they embellished their stories with rumors they swore were true.

When the evidence against the rebels had been collected, and the implicated rebels found and imprisoned, Ilsabet had Peto carried down to the dungeons to listen to the interrogation of the prisoners. Often they had to be tortured before they knew what to confess. For this, Ilsabet called on some of her father's old guards, men as skilled with a whip and a brand as they were with keeping order among their troops.

Nearly blind, unable to speak or to move, Peto's sense of hearing had become painfully acute. The screams of the victims tore through him. Ilsabet's death sentences, done in his name, sickened him as the poison had never done. For the first time since he'd fallen, he began to wish for death.

And if her acts weren't enough, there was her past.

Each night, she told him, in graphic detail, of one more despicable act-how Marishka had died, how Mihael had been driven to attack him, how Greta had discovered the poison and had to be silenced.

All that kept Peto from despair was the thought of Lekai being raised by a creature such as Ilsabet. He had to survive to save his son.

TWENTY-NINE

Twice every day, Jorani went alone to the baron and gave him a spoonful of elixir. Peto would clench and unclench his fists, wiggle his toes. Once, he even managed to lift an arm a few inches off the bed before it fell, seemingly lifeless once more.

In truth, though Peto still could not speak, he was much stronger than Jorani suspected. However, Peto could not completely trust the Kislovan lord. He'd seen how Jorani had managed to step around the questions concerning his involvement in the poisonings, how he'd volunteered nothing as innocent people were condemned to death.

Then, two weeks into his treatment, Jorani had spooned the elixir into his mouth and whispered, "If you wish me to continue giving you this, you have to make me a promise. When you recover, you must not harm Ilsabet. You may take whatever steps are necessary to see that she never kills again, but I can't let you accuse her openly. If I have your word on this, squeeze my hand.

Peto did, but only because he had no choice.

However, with time to meditate, he saw the wisdom in doing exactly what Jorani demanded. He could not condemn the mother of his child, not here, and certainly not in civilized Sundell. To do so would put his own need for revenge above Lekai's reputa-tion. He would not see his son's rule fall under the dark clouds of murder and insanity, and have him burdened through every crisis with the quiet whispers that perhaps he took too much after his mother.

Besides, Peto owed Jorani that request, for Jorani was the only one who hadn't given up on his plight.

"Ilsabet thinks I've been feeding your some useless blend of herbs and honey," Jorani told him. "Actually I think the elixir's working far more effectively than you reveal to me. I wish we could continue, but this is the last dose I have. I have to go to Argentine to find the roots I need to mix more. It's harvest time; I have a good excuse for going, but *V't't* have to stay there a few weeks.

Weeks! Peto wondered how he'd get on with Jorani gone.

"In my absence, Ilsabet is going to allow Shaul to read you her letters from Sundell and keep you informed about Kislova, as I've done. I think she means it as torment, but I know you want the information."

Peto gripped Jorani's hand harder than usual, the sign they'd worked out for affirmative.

Ilsabet visited him later, bringing Lekai with her. The boy was cutting teeth, and he fretted and cried until Ilsabet placed him on the floor. No sooner had she put him down than he dug his fingers into

Peto's woven blanket, pulled himself to his feet, and tried to climb back onto Peto's bed, screaming until Ilsabet lifted him and put him on Peto's chest.

"A strong boy. The old servants tell me even my father wasn't that strong at six months. At this rate he'll be lifting Ruven's little shield before he's a year old."

Peto, his head propped up on the pillow, managed to open his eyes just far enough to see the boy's face staring into his. Ilsabet, hovering close to keep Lekai from falling, was no more than an unfocused blur of red gown, pale skin and white-blond hair.

True to his promise, Shaul came that afternoon and read the most recent letter from Sundell-one from Peto's mother to Ilsabet. It was an acerbic account of how admirably Peto's twenty-year-old nephew ruled Sundell in his place. Ilsabet probably thought he'd find the news one more taunt, but Peto considered it a welcome contrast to Ilsabet's rule of Kislova.

When he'd finished the letter, Shaul began to talk to him, but not as Jorani did. Instead, he moved his mouth close to Peto's ear, whispering low and fearful.

"If you do hear me, forgive me for what I say, but I must try to tell you how I feel," he said. "This is a barbaric land. I can't help but think how we would have been treated if their invasion had succeeded. We should have done the same to the Obours, then placed a Sundell noble you despised in charge of these cursed people and gone home. Your wife seems to love you, Baron, but I cannot help comparing her to my own wife, whom I miss dearly. There is a coldness to the baroness that frightens me, and I doubt the guilt of those we executed.

"I've begun my own investigation into your poisoning. I've made a careful examination of the dungeons and found the tracks of a woman's shoe in an unused part of it. The baroness has been down there, yes, but only as far as the last occupied cell, and always in the company of the guards. The tracks I saw were made by a single person, and seem to lead nowhere. I believe there's some passage behind one of the walls, but everything sounds hollow down there. I'll continue to look.

"Baron, forgive me, but if what I suspect is true, I'll take your son and what remains of the Sundell guards, carry you to your coach, and leave this place. It may mean your death, but I think you might welcome that end, as I would if I were so helpless."

Peto wanted to take the man's hand, squeeze and nod, but he was afraid to do so, certain any movement on his part would give Shaul some hope of recovery and turn him from the course he'd decided on.

When his lieutenant had gone, Peto listened to the sounds of the

castle-footsteps in the hall, the rattle of chamber pots, the giggling of servant girls, and the rustle of something moving in the wall behind his bed.

One of the river rats had gotten into the wall, he hoped. He prayed, don't let it have been her.

Shaul waited until the last of the dungeon guards had made his nightly rounds, then walked past him toward the cells, torch held high.

"Can we help you find someone, Lieutenant?" the soldier asked.

"Not at all," Shaul replied, hoping they were too lazy to follow him-relieved when they didn't.

He walked the twisting passage carefully. Slime coated the floor and the rock walls had begun to calcify, leaving milky white crystals where the wall met the floor. Shaul went to the spot where he'd found the footprints and continued on to the farthest wall. There, he began a careful inspection of the stones, looking for some sign of a door.

He found it far too easily and it opened as if it had not been latched. He held the torch out and tried to see some length into the passage, but it curved too soon. Though Shaul was far from a coward, too much responsibility rested on his shoulders for him to make an unwise move. He closed the door and retreated.

Upstairs, he hastily doubled the number of Sundell guards outside Baron Peto's room and placed two inside, then woke the rest of the Sundell force. Two men were stationed at the nursery door. Four were given orders to patrol outside Ilsabet's chambers to be certain she did not leave. AH but six of the rest were sent to guard the castle doors.

The last, armed with pickaxes as well as swords, went with Shaul to the dungeons. As he suspected, the guardhouse door was shut. He heard laughter, smelled smoke and ale. Shaul and his men made their way past it easily. Well down the passage, Shaul stopped.

"Stay here," he whispered to three of his men. "Yell a warning if anyone tries to get past you."

He continued on with the remaining three guards. The passage doorway lay open and waiting. Shaul lit a fresh torch and stepped inside.

They followed the passage as it wound slowly upward. With no knowledge of the spyholes and hidden doorways into the various rooms, Shaul passed them all by, ending finally at the door leading into Jorani's secret tower room. With the room no more than an extension of the passage, its entrance was more obvious, and just as obviously barred from inside.

"Should we break it in?" one of the guards asked.

Shaul had lost all sense of direction. The passage had curled

upward, but only after a number of twists on the lower levels. They could be in Jorani's north tower or in the nearby smaller one that held the guardhouse above the main fork of the river. "Do it," he said.

While Shaul held the torch, the two largest guards beat on the door. Its old wood splintered under their combined attack until they were able to reach inside and lift the bar. A few more minutes of work and the rest of the door's planks fell away.

"Should we go in?" one of them asked.

As the man held the torch inside the room, Shaul peered past him. He recognized the room immediately. Vials sat uncorked on the table. One had overturned, its tarry liquid seeping into the pages of the book open beside it. It seemed as if Jorani had hastily abandoned the space to the spiders. Webbing was everywhere and a dozen dead rats lay rotting on the floor.

Though Shaul recalled the Kislovan lord's warning, he was curious about what it held. Til go in," he said.

The passage was no wider than the door. The soldier pulled the torch out of the room and moved sideways to let Shaul past him. As he did, the webbing stuck to the torch brushed his face. "Damned spiders," he swore. They were his last words.

Before Shaul could pass him, the soldier pitched against the opposite wall, dead before he hit the ground.

The second guard caught the torch as it fell. "What in the name…" he began, then fell backward.

Only Shaul's quick step back kept him from being burned or poisoned. He stared down at the torch flame, almost extinguished from the slime on the floor, glowing in the dead man's open eyes.

"Back away," Shaul said to the remaining guard. "Don't touch them. Try not to even touch the wall."

Easier said than done. At the first turn they lost all light, and by the time they reached the dungeons, they were coated with so much muck from countless falls that Shaul's own sentries challenged him as he approached.

"Where are the others?" someone asked.

"Poisoned. Don't touch us," he said, as if someone might want to. "Get us both a change of clothes and meet us outside."

He and the surviving guard went up the stairs and out the door that led to the river. There they stripped off their filthy clothing, kicked off their boots, and let the river carry it all where it would.

They worked quickly, without benefit of light, though even the brightest lamp wouldn't throw much light through the dense fog.

"What are we going to do now?" the guard asked.

Though he knew exactly what they would do, Shaul didn't answer. He didn't want the word to travel through the castle until he

was ready, but tomorrow what remained of Sundell forces would retreat from Kislova. If he had any say, they'd never return.

In the passage they'd abandoned, the dead men lay, fresh meat for the tiny, lethal creature that dwelt in Jorani's abandoned room. It crawled over the nearest body until it reached the soft flesh of the neck, then began to eat. It feasted through the night then abandoned the room that had held it for so long and began its slow descent through the passage.

At dawn, Shaul roused the guards. He sent some of them to the stable to saddle the horses and assemble the team for Peto's carriage. Others were sent to Peto's room to ready him for the journey. "Be sure to tell him why you're there," Shaul said. "He hears. He understands. I'm certain of it."

Orders given, he went himself to the nursery to claim SundeH's heir, but found Ilsabet sitting beside an empty cradle. She stood when Shaul entered and bowed as if he were in charge. "The thief has come for the child. I'm sorry to report that the child is gone."

"Where have you taken him?"

"Someplace safe. Someplace where you'll never find him. Now I want every Sundell soldier out of Nimbus Castle, immediately."

"I will not leave without the baron."

"Then the baron's child will die."

"You'll tell me where he is," Shaul demanded, advancing on her.

She held up a glass vial. "Don't come any closer. I'll snap this and die before I confess anything to you."

"I'll search for him."

"Will you? If I hadn't left one of the doors to my labyrinth of passages open, you never would have found it. How long can an infant live without milk? Without water?"

All argument left him. "I'll do it. I'll order the soldiers gone, but I want to stay."

She laughed. Once he thought the sound beautiful, but now its coldness cut through him like a frigid wind. "In this barbaric land, so far away from your beloved wife? Very well, Lieutenant. Every lord needs one faithful servant, even a lord as helpless as my husband. Write a message to whomever now rules Sundell. Tell him if they think to invade, their precious baron and his heir will die. Tell them Kislova is mine, as it was my father's before me."

With no choice but to obey, Shaul went and wrote the letter. The fog parted as the riders left, then closed behind them. Shaul watched them go until they vanished into the swirling vapor.

The fog did not dissipate in the warmth of the afternoon, but lay

dense and foreboding around Nimbus Castle. It seemed to have intelligence of its own, for shifting patterns took on shapes-of the dead, and of creatures never seen in these lands. Soldiers spoke of seeing their loved ones in it. Shaul himself had seen his wife, so real that he wanted to run to the vision and embrace it. He knew if he did, he would leave this place as had so many of the servants, or the Kislovan guards who had abandoned their posts to vanish in the dense darkness of the night.

For the first time in the memories of even the oldest Kislovans, the fog was not confined to the valley around the castle. In the days that followed the Sun-dell retreat, its long arms reached out through the streets of Pirie, through the hills above it, across the fields to the east and west. Even the dry land of Tygelt felt the fog's damp touch.

To the south at Argentine, Jorani stood on his bedroom balcony and watched it move across the land. He was not by nature superstitious, but he hadn't received any letters from the castle in over a week.

He knew what that meant, and what the fog meant.

In the time he'd spent at Argentine, he'd spoken at length with Rilca and learned exactly what sort of fertility potion she'd recommended to Ilsabet.

He'd also been working quickly, mixing the potent infusion that would bring either life or death to the baron. He'd finished the night before. Now it was time for the inevitable confrontation.

Sighing, he turned his back on the fog. With one final glance around his room, he went downstairs to where his horse was saddled, waiting to take him back to Ilsabet for the last time.

In the dank, secret passages of Nimbus Castle, the spider found little to eat, and it hurried on. It smelled the scents of the huge, succulent prey in the room just below it and searched in the dark for some crack wide enough to allow it to descend.

THIRTY

From the Diary of Baroness Ilsabet

Since the Sundell guards left some days ago, Shaul has sat at Peto's side like an obedient dog. He reads to Peto, tends to him as if fearful my servants would be too rough with his precious, useless body. In truth, I have been most careful with Peto, for I find his helplessness so satisfying. Both men actually cried when I released Sagra and Lekai from that hidden room and brought the boy to Peto's side. Sagra, too, wept, thinking my son was now safe from his enemies.

I saw Peto's arm tremble as he tried to hold Lekai. I looked down at my son's features. He still does not resemble Jorani, but now he does not resemble Peto either. Instead, Lekai looks most like my father, with the same fierce dark eyes and unruly red hair. The fates, it seems, have brought my father back to his land and his people.

Now that my husband and his faithful servant are both helpless, with my guards outside the door, it's time to tell them both the truth about the child they think is Sundell's heir…

Peto heard his wife's footsteps in the hall, heard her order the guards to stand close to the door, ready to come to her aid should she call.

She came to his side and kissed him as she always did. He heard his lieutenant's whispered oath, but Shaul stayed where he was, ready to defend the baron and his child, Ilsabet took her husband's hand.

"In the last few weeks, I've told you much," she said. "Now I want to tell you the rest."

And in the same beautiful voice she'd used to confess to everything else, she told him about Rilca's special tea, her night with Jorani, and the pregnancy that followed.

Peto listened, not surprised by what she believed, but not at all certain it was true. Shaul, however, was furious. He backed away from the bed. Peto could see him moving down the length of it.

"I suppose your work is finished here now, Lieutenant," Ilsabet purred. "I suppose you want to go back to your little family. You can't, of course. You'll die here, and the knowledge with you."

"Then I won't be alone!" Shaul lunged.

Ilsabet managed a strangled cry as they fell.

Peto heard her head hit the floor, then nothing. He pictured Shaul's hands around her delicate white throat, squeezing the life from her. He felt no regret.

AH this happened in an instant. Then the door burst open and the

guards stormed in, swords drawn, and pulled Shaul off the baroness, pounding him into submission.

"Shall we kill him, Baroness?" the captain asked.

It took some time for Ilsabet to catch her breath and speak. When she did, Peto could picture her smile, twisted and cold, could hear the hunger in her voice.

"Perhaps later."

Sagra entered the room, carrying Lekai. She looked from Ilsabet to Shaul and frowned. "Lord Jorani just rode through the gates."

Ilsabet clapped her hands. "Send him up."

The fog was thick around Nimbus Castle, and it had a strange, pale glow that reminded Jorani of the white mists on the path to the Seer's cave. Nothing moved in the fog, though the fog itself was moving. Patches of it thickened into phantasmal creatures. Red eyes shone out from the amorphous faces, then vanished as smoothly as they'd appeared.

A promise of things to come, Jorani thought, and shivered.

His horse refused to enter the thickest patches around the castle, and Jorani had to lead the animal on foot to the gates. No one could see him coming, so it took some time to get the guards' attention and open the gates. When they did, the fog invaded the courtyard. By the time Jorani handed his spent mount to the care of a stablehand, the mists had already reached the top of the stairs. The sound of the servants in the courtyard grew muffled, then died altogether as if the world outside the castle halls ceased to exist.

"Let what will come, come." Jorani whispered the ancient prayer to the fates and left the doors open behind him.

Sagra came to the top of the stairs, her eyes fixed on the fog. "Baroness Ilsabet wants to see you now." She pointed to the open doors of Peto's chambers.

So soon, Jorani thought, and decided it was better that way.

Ilsabet met him just inside the door, hugging him, then tilting up her head for him to kiss her. The undisguised contempt on Shaul's face told him all he needed to know about what had been revealed in his absence. Instead of kissing her, he whispered into her ear. "Dismiss the guards," he said. "We must have no witnesses."

"And the lieutenant?" she asked quietly.

"Let him see this," Jorani responded, trying to keep his tone deceptively sinister.

"He'll have to be restrained," Ilsabet countered.

"Will he?" Jorani pulled out his sword and looked at the Sundell officer, his bleeding head, the bruises on his bare arms. He breathed shallowly, his face ashen. "He couldn't stand, let alone be a match for

my blade. Tell the others to leave."

Puzzled, Ilsabet ordered the guards away, but feeling the need for an ally, asked Sagra to remain.

Shaul, all fight out of him, sought out a chair and sat, his back stiff as he tried not to put pressure on his broken ribs. Sagra hovered above him, wanting to help, but not at all certain what to do.

Jorani lifted Lekai from his father's arms, placed him on the floor, then sat beside the baron. "I'm sure my pupil has told you a great many things, Baron, but she hardly knows it all. I can't say for certain whose child Lekai is, but chance is in your favor not mine."

"But Rilca…" Ilsabet began.

"She wanted to impress you with her knowledge, so she embellished with information she knew little about. If she'd told the truth, you'd know that she tried that potion herself many times and was still childless."

Ilsabet glanced at Lekai, sitting by the bed, biting a finger to force another set of teeth through. "He looks like my father," she said stubbornly.

"So he does," Jorani agreed. "But not like me."

"It isn't true," Ilsabet whispered. "It can't be. If it were I would…"

"You'd what, Ilsabet? Kill your child out of vengeance? If I thought you capable of such a deed, I'd kill you myself," Jorani said. He carried his sword to Shaul. "Can you use it?" he asked. Shaul nodded. "See that she doesn't interfere."

"And see that the lieutenant obeys only that order," Ilsabet said to Sagra. The servant did not answer. She was looking at Shaul's battered face, as if seeing clearly for the first time what sort of a mistress she served.

Returning to the baron, Jorani pulled out the vial he'd brought. "How is your strength?" he asked.

Peto managed to close both hands into fists, to whisper a word: "Better."

"Good. I've brought the strongest stimulant I dare use. Your life belongs to the fates." He sat next to the baron and poured the contents of the bottle into his mouth, then tilted his head back to help him swallow.

The baron's body trembled. He opened his eyes and focused on Ilsabet, standing frozen beside his bed.

"What have you done?" she whispered to Jorani.

"What my conscience demanded," he replied.

While the prey had fought in the room below, the spider had found a narrow space beside the ceiling lamp and slowly worked its way through the crack. It moved carefully over the brass cap and

down the heavy chain. The prey stood below the lamp, smelling sweet, a fragrance the spider recognized from its days in the glass globe. It would prefer to hunt at night, but it was hungry, and food was near. Nonetheless, it waited until the room was nearly silent before letting out a strand of webbing and beginning its descent.

Hsabet stared at her child-*Peto's* child-crawling across the floor, and in that moment she loved him and hated him. As with Marishka, as with Mihael, as with Peto… If there were only a way to kill him… and then she noticed the spider falling directly above her son. Jorani had said the fates should decide. They seemed to have done so.

But she was not the only one that saw. With all the strength left in him, Peto pushed himself up and pointed to the spider. "No!"

Shaul saw it, too, and lunged. He reached the child a moment too late and, striking the web, collapsed lifelessly atop the babe.

Tears, the first real tears Ilsabet had ever shed, came to her eyes. She rushed toward her son, arms outstretched. "Forgive me," she whispered. "For a moment I forgot how much I love you." Quickly, she pulled a vial from a chain around her neck. "I'll bring you back to me," she said, and began to uncork it.

"No!" Jorani bellowed, his denial an echo of Peto's. In one deft movement, he snatched his sword from the floor… but in that same moment, Sagra grabbed up the child, ran to the door, and unlatched it.

"You don't know what she'll do," Jorani cried, then saw Lekai's hand move. The child was not dead; not yet. "Strip him!" Jorani shouted, looking in wonder at the thick shirt the boy wore.

As he spoke, a current of air from the door blew a web into his mouth. His knees gave way, and with an expression of shock Ilsabet knew all too well, he joined the other corpse on the floor.

"I won't allow this," Ilsabet whispered, kneeling beside Jorani. Using Shaul's cape to sweep the web from Jorani's face, she poured half her potion into his mouth. "I'll be a gentle mistress."

And then, life returned to Jorani's body. The limbs shook, the eyes opened, and with an expression of love such as had never appeared on that dour face, he kissed Ilsabet's hand.

"Run!" Peto shouted to Sagra, who yet tottered indecisively at the door. "Run!"

She obeyed, disappearing into the fog that had filled the hall outside Peto's chamber.

Ilsabet began to follow, but halted, her eyes fixed on the swirling mists. Marishka had suddenly appeared there, floating in the center of it, her incorporeal body supported by the long thin arms of the Seer.

"You cannot change my course!" Ilsabet screamed, then slammed

the door. She turned to Jorani, who trembled, weak and confused. "It's not done, my mentor, my lover. This vengeance will be finished."

Her eyes were drawn to Peto, who clumsily fumbled for Jorani's sword. She hissed, grabbing the hilt and drawing the sword away, slicing open his palm. "It is not done yet."

Jorani took an unsteady step toward the baron, staring thirstily at the blood that dripped from his master's hand. Ilsabet smiled. There was poison enough in this room to induce another coma in her husband, but she now knew that as long as he lived, she would never rule in her own name. And, finally, she admitted that this was what she'd wanted all along.

She would have her rightful place as ruler of Kislova-not Mihael, not her son-herself!

"Feed," she ordered Jorani. "Take the blood you need from Peto, then kill him."

Without hesitation, Jorani turned toward the baron.

Somewhere in the depths of Jorani's eyes, Peto saw conflict, confusion. He tried to push Jorani away, but he could not. The Kislovan gripped his wrists and pulled them over his head as easily as if

Peto were a child.

"Jorani," Peto whispered. "Friend, don't do this." Only a hint of regret showed on the Kislovan's face as he bent to feed. Then the door swung slowly open, and fog rolled into the room.

THIRTY-ONE

From the Diary of Baroness Ilsabet

I waited long enough to be certain Peto was dead, then turned toward the open door. The fog was rolling across the floor. It had already covered Shaul's body and was moving toward the bed. There, Jorani sat, looking down at my husband as if he weren't certain he'd caused the terrible wound in Peto's neck. A moment later, the fog covered them both.

I thought of Lekai and made my way through the thick cloud to the nursery. Since I could scarcely see a foot in front of me, I traveled on memory. More than once I shut my eyes against the horrors the miasma displayed. I will not detail them now, only say that every ghost I'd glimpsed before took on greater clarity in the swirling tendrils until it seemed that they were the living creatures, my castle and myself the ghosts. I even saw my father, whole and alive, his expression condemning me as the others did.

It was a trick of the Seer's; a revenge for her death. I let her play her useless games, for I'd moved beyond caring.

The nursery was empty. I ignored my fury and felt my way down the stairs and out the doors that some fool-some traitor most likely-had left open, letting in the cursed cloud.

Jorani's horse was tethered to a post near the castle gates. Nearby, a stableboy cowered beneath a blanket. I pulled it back and crouched beside him. "Did you see my servant and my son?" I asked.

He trembled so hard that I had to slap him to get him to respond. "The people in the fog," he whispered. I repeated my question with greater force. "Sagra went out in the fog," he replied. ttI told her not to go, but she wouldn't listen."

"On foot?"

He nodded, and I let him cover his head once more. Truthfully, if not for my need to find Lekai, I would have gladly joined him.

Jorani's horse shied at my touch. Perhaps it too saw things moving in the fog-mountain cats, or cave bears, or fantastic creatures from equine nightmares. Even if I'd ridden, I could hardly have gone faster than on foot, and might easily pass Sagra by. With that thought, I ran through the gates, then continued on at a quick but quiet pace, listening to the sounds of the world around me-for my servant's quick breaths, or hopefully, my child's muffled cry.

There was nothing but the low, dense clouds pressing against me. I went on, hurrying as quickly as I dared, wondering if the miasma had been this thick when Sagra abandoned the castle. She would no doubt head for the path that climbed toward Pirie then turn west

toward Sundell. I followed, but at the place where the drop to the river was steepest, I saw a patch of color against the dull brown road and went to it.

Sagra's russet cloak lay on the ground, and just visible beneath it were the bright blue pants and sweater Lekai had been wearing. Sagra had stopped to undress him. Then I remembered Jorani's words-*Strip him*! He must have been alive, or she would not have bothered.

"Sagra!" I called, then held my breath and listened.

Nothing, save the sound of the river fifty feet or so below me. I knelt and studied the bank. There were signs that someone had stepped off the side of the road and down the steep drop to the river. I looked closer at the road, but many people use it. If someone had waylaid Sagra here, I'd have no way of knowing.

I backtracked a quarter mile and found a narrow footpath down to the water's edge. Once there, I moved upstream toward the place where Sagra-or, I shuddered to think of it, Lekai-had fallen.

I wasn't mistaken. My servant lay faceup, half in and half out of the water. I looked close and saw that her neck was broken. There was no sign of my son.

I searched downstream, then above the place where Sagra had fallen, but Lekai had vanished. This troubled me. I wanted to know for certain whether he lived.

If he did, someone had taken him. Rebels may have abducted him. More likely, though, some of Peto's scouts had remained in the area and saw a chance to spirit him away to Sundell. I pictured Sagra fighting with them to keep hold of the child, then falling to her death when they wrenched the boy out of her arms.

If he had gone to Suncjell, someday the son on which I'd placed all my hopes would be a threat to me.

With this in my mind, I started up the footpath, but paused, hearing the waters of the Arvid begin to beat against the banks as if rising. I quickened my pace, but midway up the footpath, a shifting wind struck me with such force that I knew the fog had turned to a deadly storm. Lightning flashed in the swirling clouds. Thunder deafened me.

I took refuge in a stand of boulders, wedging my body into a narrow crack, envying the stableboy his blanket as the rains began to fall in a cold torrent.

Lightning bolts struck the water, spreading a strange cloak of sparks over the river. I glimpsed things moving on the water, shapes of dragons, of creatures with vaguely human forms but so hideous and malformed that they must have come from the netherworld. I also saw the castle in the distance and envied those safe in its walls in a storm such as this.

Hours passed. The storm abated somewhat, the visions vanished. Nonetheless, I remained where I was throughout the night.

In the morning, the sun rose and burned through the fog. When its rays hit the ripples of the river, they shone so brightly after those days of gloom that I had to turn my head away and wipe the tears from my eyes. I went down to the river, rinsed the mud from my hands and face and hair, and started for home.

The area outside Nimbus Castle was occupied with stalls of merchants selling produce and wares, and all were doing a lively business. Buyers and sellers alike recognized me and bowed respectfully as I passed, though they eyed my ripped and filthy garments strangely. I was the only tattered creature there. The booths were in pristine shape and the grounds around the castle manicured as I had never seen before. As I walked among them, I heard much chatter, but nothing about the terrible fog or the storm that had ended it. For all their interest, it might never have happened.

Perhaps it hadn't, at least not to them.

For the first time since Father died, I was terrified-certain if I mentioned my experience to anyone in Kislova, they would think me mad, or worse.

walked through the open gates of Nimbus Castle, also bustling. The stablehands were leading away a pair of horses, and there were three others waiting to be tended to. The doors to the hall stood open, and I saw a flash of color on the stairs; someone going up. One of the guards on duty at the gates ran to me, fell to one knee, and without asking where I'd been, offered me his blue Kislova cloak. I accepted it graciously, letting him escort me up the stairs.

"Such a terrible accident," the man said as we went.

wanted to ask him what he meant but didn't dare. Fortunately, I didn't have to.

"Shaul was a good soldier. Everyone who knew him is in shock," he continued. "Even though the body is being taken back to Sundell for burial, the guards hope you'll give permission for us to hold a ceremony here to honor him."

At any other time, I might have been furious at the suggestion of honoring a soldier from Sundell. Now I was only perplexed. "Tomorrow morning," I said.

And what of the baron? I wondered, but dared not ask. Instead I hid my growing discomfort and walked into the room where Peto had died.

General Raimundi and some of the Pirie merchants were sitting at Peto's bedside, conferring with Jorani. I dismissed the guard and paused just inside the door. The men were discussing improvements that needed to be done in the city, as well as additions to the wharf

that served the castle. Often they addressed Jorani, but sometimes they seemed to be speaking to Peto as if he could hear and understand, as if he were still alive.

Jorani noticed me first. He stopped speaking in midsentence and walked toward me, his expression as concerned and confused as the guard's had been.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

I nodded. Until I determined precisely what was going on, the best course seemed to be deceit. "I

went down to inspect the wharf. The pilings were slippery. I fell in. The current caught my gown. I nearly drowned." I looked at Jorani's face as I spoke, pleased to see the same dullness I had noted in Emory's eyes, the same dumb adoration. Though I regretted what had happened to him, at least one thing remained the same since last night.

I walked forward to the bed. Though Peto was as motionless as if he were dead, there was no trace of blood on his bedclothes, nor any sign of the wound Jorani had made. I moved closer. Peto's eyes opened, and he looked at me. I saw the horror in their depths.

"He seems much improved," one of the merchants commented.

"So he does," I said. I dismissed everyone and sat at Peto's side.

"It's a trick," I whispered to myself. "Another vision of the Seer's, or a dream. I'm still on the river-bank, still curled against that cursed rock, riding out the storm. That's the reality, while this…"

Though I swear Peto's expression did not change, I sensed some grim humor in him, as if he enjoyed my confusion. "You know what happened," I whispered. "You remember."

With an effort, he managed to nod, then shut his eyes again.

"And the merchant is right, you are much improved." I wanted to laugh, but the sound would not have been one of mirth, or triumph, but of hysteria. "Too much so. If you think the Seer saved your life, I can tell you she's only condemned you to a second, more painful death. Think about that until I return."

I went to my chambers, bathed and dressed as befitted my station, and sought out Jorani.

I found him in his tower rooms, lying faceup on the hard pallet he had always used as a bed. Though his eyes were open, he did not look toward me when his hawks screeched a warning. I sat beside him and bent down to kiss him. He turned his head away.

"Do you really think it fitting to love your slave?"

"And if I ordered you to lie with me?" I replied.

"I would do as you command. Is that what you want?"

There was no emotion in his voice, and I knew the man I had loved was as dead to me as Father.

"No," I said, and looked away. I wondered if I would ever look at him without thinking of all I had lost with his death. "What do you remember from last night?"

"Returning from Argentine in the fog. Giving the potion to the baron. And I remember…" He hesitated, finishing with a tone of wonder. "… dying. You brought me back. Then you ran away into the fog. Why, Ilsabet?"

"To find Lekai."

"Lekai is in Sundell. You sent him there yourself two days ago."

I began to understand the depth of the Seer's power. "And what do you recall of Peto last night?"

"Just the potion."

"Nothing else?"

"Blood. But that must have been a dream. He's still alive; it must have been."

He spoke so earnestly, I could only reply that, yes, it was a dream, nothing more.

We ate an early dinner with the merchants who had been at Peto's bedside that morning. I was pleased to see Jorani eating; this meant he was like Emory, well in control of his needs. By the time we'd finished, it was near dusk, and fog was rising from the river.

"We'd best leave for Pirie while we can," one of the men said.

"Of course," I replied. "But return in the morning, and we'll talk further about trade with Sundell."

I walked outside with them, then left them with Jorani and went to bed.

In spite of all I'd been through, I could not sleep. Peto was alive, and as long as he remained so, I would rule beneath him. I considered my options and decided on an immediate course. I left my chamber doors open, listening until I heard the servant who tended Peto leave him for the night.

I lit the lamp in my room and went next door to the room where Greta had slept. Her clothes were still in the cupboard, and I pulled a servant's sash from a drawer. Hiding it in my dark robe, I walked softly to Peto's chambers. I lit the candle beside his bed, sat there, and took his hand. "Lekai isn't in Sundell. You know that as well as I do. I'll find him, Peto. I'll bring him back and raise him. That's my final promise to you."

I held up the sash. "There are spies everywhere," I said, then dropped it across his chest.

I kissed him one more time, then took his sword from its place on the table beside his sickbed. It was heavy, but I had enough strength to lift it, to hold it above him, to stab down into his chest.

I saw him wince, but his eyes stared at me, condemning me. With

a stifled cry of rage, I lifted the sword again and brought it down, separating his head from his body as he had done to my father only three years before.

"Let's see if Sagesse can bring you back now," I whispered, then laid the sash in his hand and left him.

Safe in my own chambers, I lit an oil lamp, carefully washed the few drops of blood from my robe, and got ready for bed. When I turned to blow out the light, I saw fog leaking through cracks in the shutters, as if it were smoke, not vapor. It must have been as thick as the night before, but I dared not open the window, fearful of what creatures I might let inside. Instead, I lay curled in a tight ball, too frightened to sleep.

I missed Greta, Sagra, the man Jorani had been. But most of all, I missed my son. I had never felt so alone. My only comfort was the thought that tomorrow, when the merchants returned from Pirie, they would find my husband dead, a servant's sash clutched in his hand. There are assassins everywhere. It would take months to find the culprit.

I lay in bed until late the following morning, waiting for someone to come and tell me my husband had been killed. Eventually one of the maids did knock politely on my door and ask if I needed any assistance. I sent her away and dressed quickly in my best blue morning gown.

The merchants were already in the room with Peto, hovering around the bed. Jorani was with them. I heard him explaining dryly how the additional docks should be built. I paid little heed to his words, walking forward on legs scarcely able to hold me.

There was no blood on the bed or the floor or the sword, now lying in its usual place on the table. Peto, his body propped up by a dozen feather pillows, sat looking at the men. When he saw me, he even managed a smile.

I dreamt that I killed him, what else could explain this? I walked forward and saw the brown sash just visible on the floor.

As I bent down to kiss his cheek, it occurred to me that this facade would go on and on for the rest of our lives. I would never be rid of him, would forever rule beneath him. That was the curse Sagesse had left me.

EPILOGUE

From the Diary of Baroness Ilsabet

The soldiers taking Shaul's body back to his family in Sundell never crossed the border. A mile from it, they encountered a fog thicker than any they had ever experienced, rising in the heat of the midafter-noon sun. That alone would have made them suspect sorcery. When the horses refused to enter it and the men who did were filled with fear, they retreated and returned to Nimbus Castle. I questioned them, but they said little. The fear I sensed in them made it clear the Seer's curse has not ended.

My soldiers burned Shaul's body that night. I watched the flames devour him, staying until his bones were no more than dust among the embers.

Even the fire couldn't diminish the thick night fog, though its smoke added a new denseness to it. I walked through it to the castle and up the stairs to my room, where servants had already closed and barred the shutters against the horrors of the night.

Now I rule a cursed land, a land much changed from the days of my father, a land isolated from its neighbors, utterly alone. Each night the fog covers it. My subjects close their doors and build up their fires in even the hottest weather, for there are creatures walking in the fog that had never before lived in Kislova, save in legends.

They speak of wights, of vampires and werewolves. And in the fog's thick shroud, even the dead walk. Arman and Emory have been seen feasting on sheep in the hills, the rebels of Pirie pace the deserted wharfs, and Sagesse's ghost has been glimpsed in the streets of Tygelt, filling the entire land with fear.

But in the daylight when I ride among my subjects with Jorani at my side, they cheer. They are unaware that I am the cause of all their terror, and that I am watching them, choosing my next victim with care.

Like Jorani and Arman before, I must feed-not on blood but on pain and despair. I take my victims to the room where Peto died and lives again. I let him witness each torture, watch Jorani's final kill.

Sometimes I think Jorani remembers killing my husband, but if he does, he keeps the memory to himself.